



NEW

THE FIERCE STRUGGLE FOR ITALY'S MOUNTAINOUS SLOPES

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WAR**

MONTE CASSINO



FEATURING:
PHOTOGRAPHS,
ILLUSTRATIONS AND
BATTLE STORIES

OPERATION DIADEM

Inside the fight to break
down the German defence

**Digital
Edition**

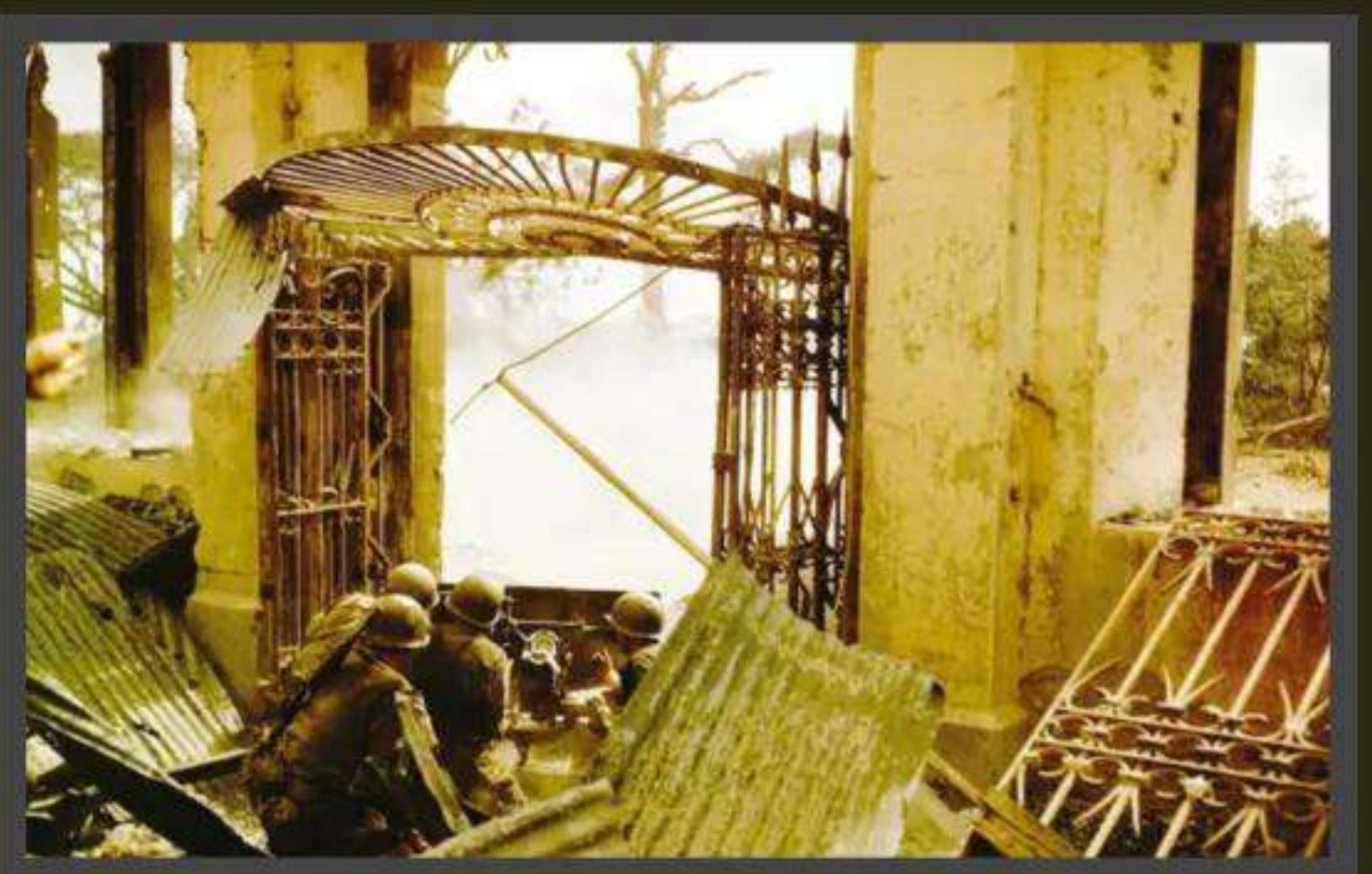
FUTURE

SECOND
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Uphill struggle

How the punishing terrain took
its toll on Allied troops



A hollow victory?

Analysing the controversial
bombing of Monte Cassino



Attacking Anzio

Storming the beaches as part
of Operation Shingle





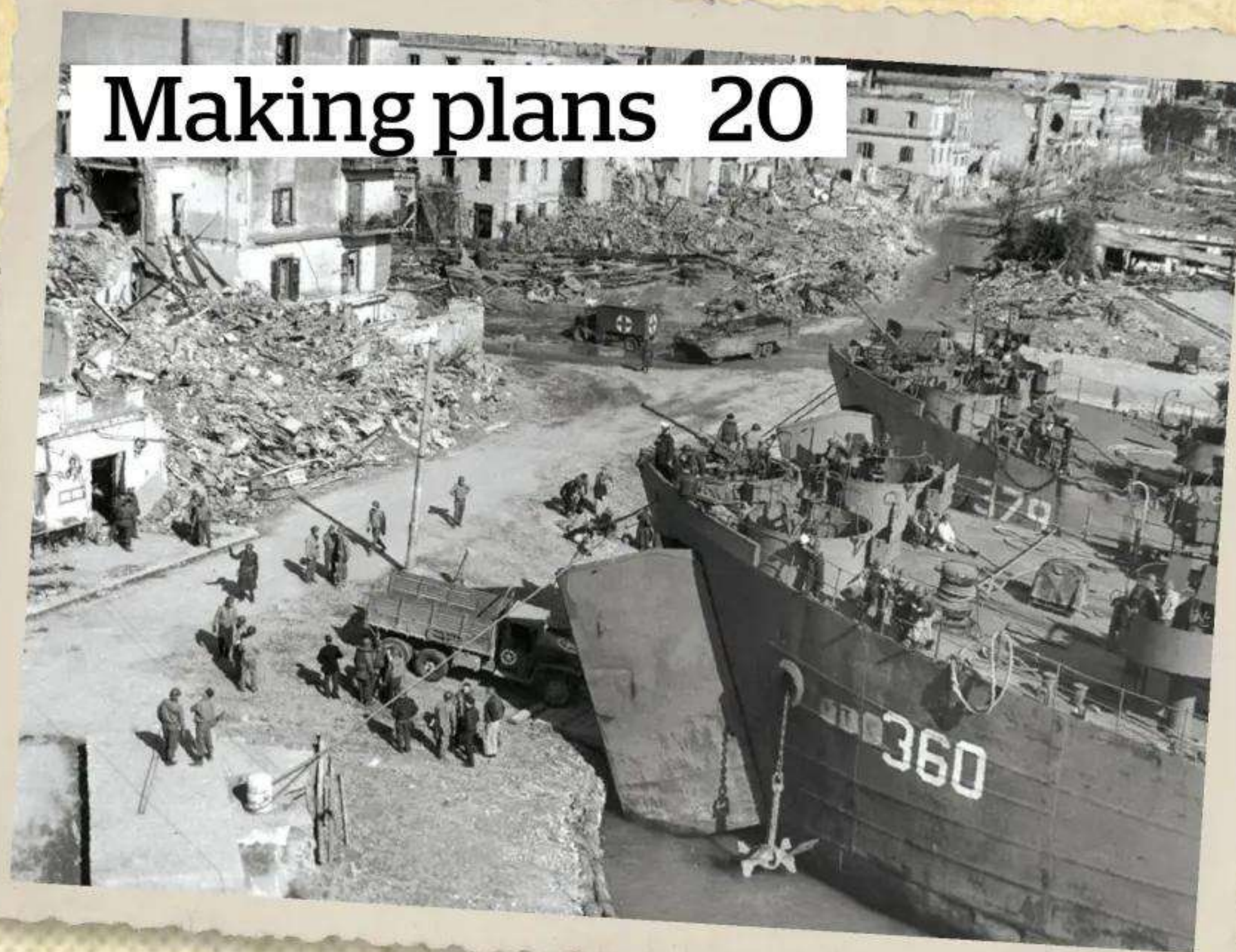
WELCOME

By the beginning of 1944, the German advance in Europe had been halted, the Axis forces had been defeated in North Africa and Churchill had convinced the Americans to maintain the pressure in Italy. As the Allies fought their way up from southern Italy, they faced the monastery at Monte Cassino, the strongest point of a powerful German defensive line. The conflict that followed lasted four months, left a quarter of a million dead or wounded, and has been subsequently described as one of the toughest and bloodiest battles fought in western Europe in World War II.

Fornace
Materno

CONTENTS

Making plans 20



The war in Italy - introduction 6

The First Battle of Monte Cassino 18

Making plans 20

X Corps assault 28

US II Corps assault 34

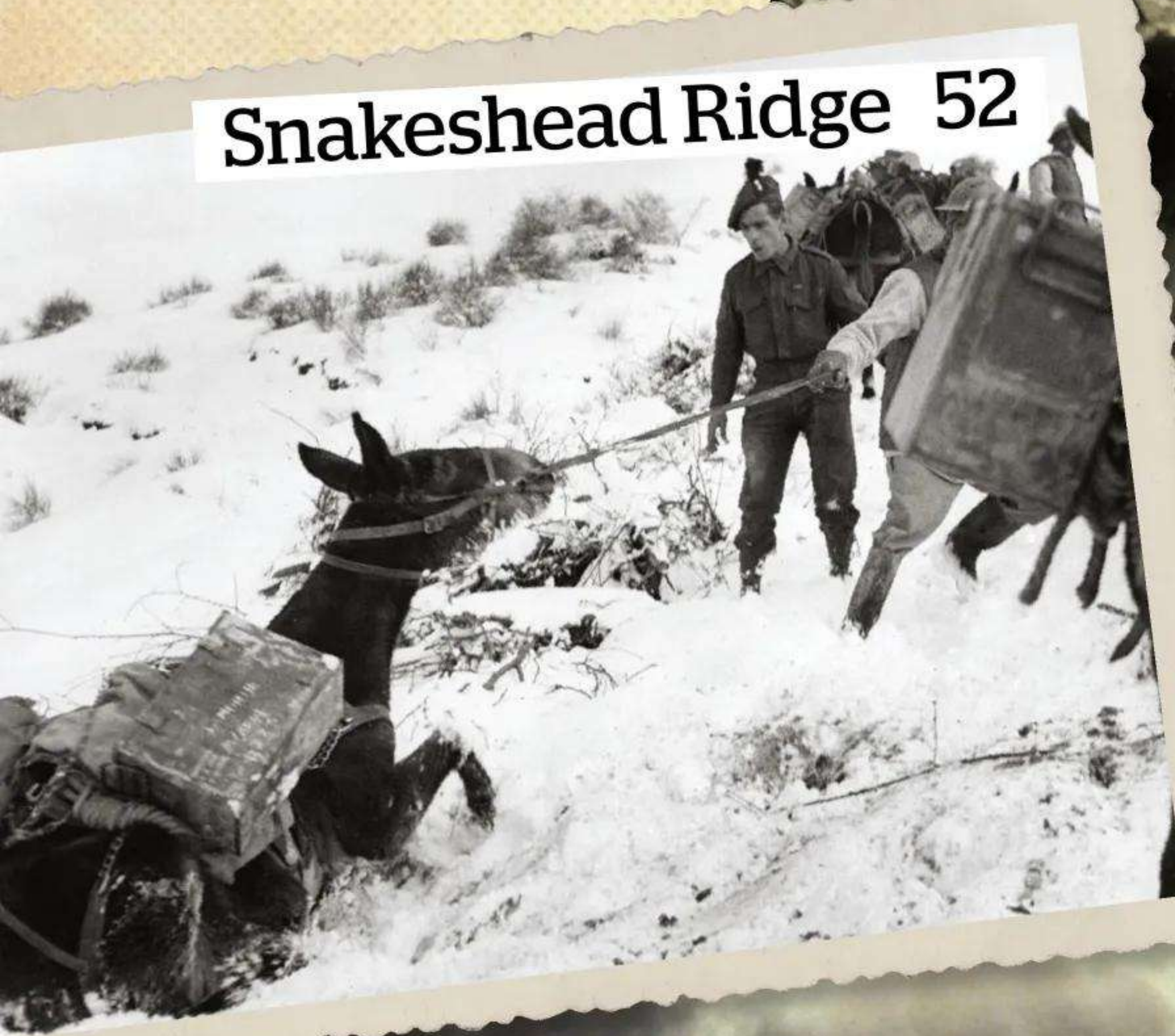
The Anzio landing 40

Snakeshead Ridge 52

Withdrawal and replacement 62



Snakeshead Ridge 52



The Second Battle of Monte Cassino 68

A Renewed attack 70

Bombing the abbey 72

Results of the bombing 76

Attack in the mountains 82

The New Zealanders advance 88

BOMBING THE ABBEY 72



The first strike 116



The Third Battle of Monte Cassino 94

Planning the two-pronged attack 96

The battle begins 98

The FG42 in action 102

Reorganisation and assessment 110



The Fourth Battle of Monte Cassino 112

Operation Diadem 114

The first strike 116

The Poles take the monastery 120

The line is crossed 124

THE POLES TAKE THE MONASTERY 120



The Allies' progress

By the beginning of 1944, the German advance had been halted. On the Eastern Front, they were defeated at Stalingrad...





Battle of Stalingrad, 1943:
Soviet T-34 tanks and
troops engaged in battle

Getty Images

The American
victory in the
Battle of Midway
proved the
turning point in
the war in the
Pacific, and the
Axis forces had
been defeated in
North Africa...





Libya, 1942: British heavy
artillery firing during the
night near Tobruk

Getty Images



Italy, 1944: German prisoners evacuated from the Anzio beachhead



Getty Images

The Allies were split about where to take the fight into Europe, but Churchill finally persuaded the Americans to keep the pressure up in Italy...



THE WAR IN ITALY

Despite the Allies' superior numbers, the Germans maintained the upper hand...

Sicily was taken in July 1943 and just two months later, General Sir Harold Alexander, Commander in Chief of the Allied Armies in Italy, crossed into the south of the Italian mainland with two armies.

Following the Allied landings, Italy surrendered on 8 September 1943, soon after the first troops landed, but her erstwhile German allies then became occupiers, setting up a puppet regime in the north of the country and taking over her defences and military installations. The German commander in Italy, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring (nicknamed 'Smiling Albert'), organised his forces to receive the inevitable Allied advance.



Sicily, 1943: America troops walk down a war-ravaged street in Messina

General Alexander pressed northwards, with one army either side of the mountain range that runs the length of the Italian 'boot' as he marched on towards Rome. In the West, Lieutenant-General Mark W Clark led the US 5th Army. He landed at Salerno on 9 September, capturing Naples on 6 October. In the east, General Sir Bernard Montgomery's British 8th Army crossed the straits of Messina, landing on mainland Italy on 3 September and pressing north. After forcing a crossing of the River Trigno on 22 October, it continued up the Adriatic coast until General Alexander ordered his forces to halt on 15 November, regrouping for an assault on the Winter Line, a series of fortifications to the south of Rome. These formidable defences

were made up of barbed wire barricades, machine gun turrets, gun pits, concrete bunkers and minefields. The most significant of these was the Gustav Line, which stretched the breadth of Italy.

Progress was slow. Well built German defences proved difficult to break, and when they eventually fell, the German troops simply pulled back to another pre-prepared line, using the defender's advantage to inflict maximum damage on the advancing Allies. Heavy rainfall made progress even slower, as did the mountainous terrain, which prevented the Allies from taking advantage of their greater numbers. Initial estimates that Rome would fall by October 1943 proved wildly optimistic. Every mile was a struggle.

War of attrition

By the end of the year, it was clear to the Allied commanders that the invasion of Italy would become a war of attrition – and it had already proven costly in terms of both men and machinery. Perhaps this is not surprising. The last time Rome had been taken from the south was in AD 536, when Byzantine general Belisarius defeated the Gothic garrison. During the Second Punic War of 218-203 BC, Hannibal avoided the southern approach by crossing the Alps rather than take the more direct route from Carthage in North Africa.

As Napoleon is believed to have said, "Italy is a boot. You have to enter it from the top." The advancing 8th Army had punctured

Battle of Monte Cassino



the German defences on the Adriatic coast, but were halted at Ortona, when winter blizzards made further progress impossible. A combination of the mountainous terrain and lack of air support due to the weather meant the path to Rome from this direction, known as Route 5, was abandoned as a viable battle plan.

This left two options over on the west coast – Routes 6 and 7 – both of which took the Allied armies from Naples to Rome. Highway 7, the old Roman Appian Way, followed the coast. Unfortunately, before it reached Rome it passed through the Pontine Marshes, which had been drained by Mussolini in the 1930s. Anticipating an assault from this direction, the Germans turned off the pumps and opened the dykes, flooding the marshes once more. This devastated local agriculture, and

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This devastated local agriculture, and turned the marshes back into a mosquito-infested bog”

turned the marshes back into a mosquito-infested bog.

The gustav line

This left Highway 6, which led inland through the Liri valley. It was a difficult route. At the southern entrance, tall hills behind the town of Cassino gave the Germans excellent observation points from which to watch Allied movements and direct artillery strikes on an advancing army. The aptly named Rapido river was fast-flowing and difficult to cross.

Near Cassino it joined with the Liri to form the Garigliano, but was no less formidable a barrier here. To make matters worse, the Germans had diverted the Rapido and flooded part of the valley, making progress even more difficult.



Italy, 1944: American infantry advancing through the mountains. Progress was painfully slow due to the Germans' excellent defences

Cassino itself sat on the Gustav Line, the strongest of the Germans' Winter Line fortifications. The line stretched from just north of the Garigliano estuary on the Tyrrhenian Sea on the west coast, through Cassino to the town of Ortona on the eastern shore. From November 1943, Hitler took a personal interest in the Gustav Line and ordered it be reinforced to 'fortress strength'. Natural defensive positions afforded by the fast-flowing rivers and mountainous terrain had been bolstered by the Germans, who demolished buildings and cut down trees to create fields of fire. Natural caves were fortified and reinforced, and dugouts linked by tunnels were built. Minefields were laid, bridges were blown and booby traps installed.

Abbey exclusion zone

Every possible route for the attackers was surveyed and countered, and every opportunity taken to nullify the Allies' superiority in air power and armoured vehicles. It's here that Kesselring made his stand for the winter. Yet one key opportunity to install a defensive position was not taken.

The Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, established around AD 529, was also on the Gustav Line. A huge building with walls around 20 feet thick in places, it was certainly an imposing sight. As Lieutenant John Buckeridge of the Royal Sussex Regiment put it, "It was such a vast building, and it had that slightly eerie feeling of looking at you the whole time. The clouds broke, and suddenly

you could see the monastery five miles away, perched up on top of this incredible cliff, dominating everything." But despite its extremely useful location – on a key mountain top overlooking Highway 6, just over a mile west of Cassino – Field Marshal Kesselring ordered his troops not to include it in the defensive line and imposed a 300 metre exclusion zone around the abbey, informing both the Vatican and the Allies of his decision.

But even without the abbey, the Gustav Line defences presented an awesome obstacle. Lieutenant DH Deane of the Scots Guards described what the Allies faced: "Impregnable mountains, obviously [filled] with armies of Bosche. Vast mountains lie in front, bleak and sinister."

Battle of Monte Cassino

Italy, 1944: A German soldier beside his Panzerfaust, a portable anti-tank grenade launcher, near the town of Cassino. Cassino sat on the Gustav Line, which was one of the Germans' Winter Line fortifications and had been personally ordered by Hitler to be reinforced to 'fortress strength'. They took advantage of natural defensive positions and every opportunity was taken to thwart and slow the Allies' progress





THE FIRST BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

12 January to 12 February 1944

The first attack on the Gustav Line was to be a two-pronged assault. A 20-mile section of the line, where it met the sea in the west, was the target. The British X Corps would take the left, with the 5th

and 56th Infantry Divisions crossing the Garigliano river near the coast on 17 January 1944. The British 46th Division would attack on 19 January, crossing the Garigliano near its junction with the Liri. This would be in support of the US

II Corps, whose assault would begin on 20 January, crossing the Rapido river five miles from Cassino. The French Expeditionary Corps would make a simultaneous attack on Monte Cairo, which loomed over Monte Cassino.



Making plans	20
X Corps assault	28
US II Corps assault	34
The Anzio landing	40
Snakeshead Ridge	52
Withdrawal and replacement	62

January 1944: British soldiers fire grenades at German Wehrmacht positions in Monte Cassino

Getty Images

MAKING PLANS

The Allied commanders had ambitious plans for their assaults, but not everyone had faith in them

The chances of taking such a well fortified position with a direct frontal assault across fast-flowing rivers seemed slim, however, the attack would tie up German reserves and turn their attention from a second front that the Allies hoped to open.

This second assault, codenamed Operation Shingle, was an amphibious landing at Anzio, north of the Gustav Line and not far from Rome. Here the US VI Corps, Commanded by Major-General John P Lucas and made up of the British 1st and US 3rd Infantry Divisions, would make a beach landing on 22 January. With surprise on their side, they would make a move to the Alban Hills, which dominated both Routes 6 and 7 to Rome, and maybe even take the Italian capital itself.

From there, they would disrupt German supply lines and threaten the rear of the Gustav Line, getting behind the German 10th Army and harrying its rear and flanks, hopefully forcing it to retreat to avoid being surrounded. The 5th Army's Lieutenant-General Clark hoped this would force a German withdrawal to positions north of Rome, to avoid being cut off or surrounded. Churchill was equally keen. "It will astonish the world, and it will certainly frighten Kesselring," he said.

Road to rome

Route 6 was especially important to the Allies. The main road into Rome from the town of Cassino, it circled the mountain of Monte Cassino before extending into the Liri Valley, which was the only route to the capital that was capable of supporting a large-scale mechanised advance. Although the surrounding mountains would provide the Germans with a very strong defensive position, this valley was crucial to the Allied planners.

Preparations for the attack didn't go as well as expected. The 5th Army took six weeks and 16,000 casualties advancing through the Bernhardt Line, a defensive position it reached in early December 1943, and it didn't

arrive at the Gustav Line until 15 January 1944. But there was to be no respite for rest and recuperation. The craft needed for the Anzio landing were only available until the end of January, after which they would be moved back to England ready for the D-Day landings in the summer. The operation had to go ahead as scheduled.

A question of faith

Not all the Allied commanders had faith in the plans. Major-General Ted Walker, who commanded a sub-unit of the Canadian-American First Special Service Force, which was to be used in the landing at Anzio, wrote in his diary, "We might succeed, but I don't see how we can. The crossing is dominated by heights on both sides of the valley where German observers are ready. Clark sent me his best wishes. I think he was worried over the fact that he made an unwise decision."

Clark himself was mindful of the disastrous amphibious landing he had led in September 1943 at Salerno, south of Naples. This had been his first field command. An aggressive and headstrong commander, Clark had a tendency to let his personal ambitions cloud his military judgement, and this was proven at Salerno.

He charged ashore and advanced too quickly, failing to consolidate his bridgehead, and was almost thrown back into the sea. Mindful of this near-disastrous assault, before

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**It will astonish the world,
and it will certainly
frighten Kesselring.”**

Winston Churchill





Allied landings: American troops dock at the port of Anzio during the Allied invasion of Italy, codenamed Operation Shingle, in January 1944

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

the Anzio landings he said to Lucas, “don’t stick your neck out, Johnny. I did at Salerno, and got into trouble. You can forget this goddamn Rome business.” Hardly inspiring advice to a commander of an assault force that was expected to make an aggressive move from a dangerous beach landing.

Indeed, his comments conflicted with instructions from General Alexander, who expected the force to make a rapid advance to the hills and to capture Colli Laziali under the umbrella of the XII Air Support Command. Clark, uncharacteristically, didn’t back such an aggressive move, leading his deputy chief of staff, General Sir Charles Richardson, to later declare, “Anzio was a complete nonsense from its inception.”

Anzio beach landings

The troops on the ground who were to carry out the Anzio landing also feared the worst. Beach landings, especially by night, are extremely dangerous. As they leave the landing craft and run onto the wide open beach, the landing troops are highly vulnerable, and thereafter they’re dependent on the sea for reinforcements and supplies. Bad weather can also throw even the best plans into disarray.

As Lieutenant Edward Grace of the Gordon Highlanders put it, “We expected to get a right royal reception from the Germans. All the machine guns would open up at once as we approached the beach, and no doubt there would be heavy artillery fire coming right down onto the navy, and no doubt some of the shells landing right on top of us on the beach.”

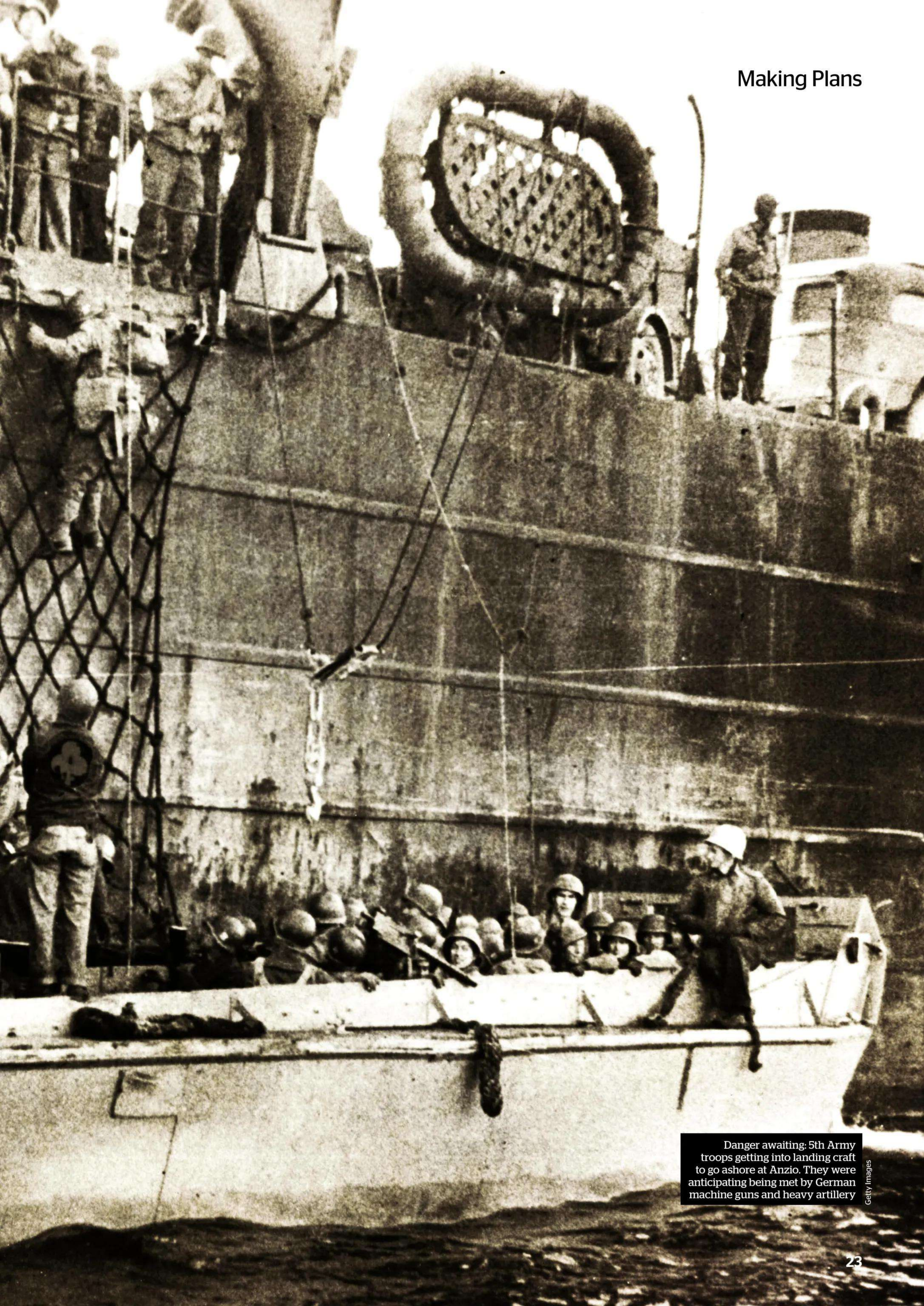
Naturally, Field Marshall Kesselring and the Germans had plans of their own, and these plans had not been correctly anticipated by the Allies. While expecting the 10th Army to beat a hasty retreat, to avoid being surrounded was entirely in keeping with German tactics over the previous three months. What the Allies didn’t realise was that the main reason for their strategy of fighting behind pre-installed defensive positions, and then retreating to another defensive installation, was to buy time to reinforce the Gustav Line and the other positions that made up the Winter Lines. This allowed for a prolonged stance during one of

“

We expected to get a right royal reception from the Germans. No doubt there would be artillery fire”

Lieutenant Edward Grace





Danger awaiting: 5th Army troops getting into landing craft to go ashore at Anzio. They were anticipating being met by German machine guns and heavy artillery

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

“

**There was no shelter except
for caves and slit trenches”**

US 2nd Chemical Mortar Battalion



Battling the elements: American soldiers trying to free a jeep stuck in the mud near Cassino. The harsh winter of 1943 hampered the Allies to a huge extent, putting both men and machinery out of action



Making Plans

the harshest Italian winters in living memory, on one of the best defensive positions enjoyed by any defending army in World War II. It wasn't ground they'd give up lightly.

Heavy weather

The weather was yet another factor that weighed heavily in the Germans' favour. From mid-October to late December 1943, heavy rain had turned most of the Italian lowlands into a muddy mess, swamping airfields and making roads almost impassable. In the mountains, rain turned to sleet and snow, which settled in massive drifts. In the lead-up to the assault on the Gustav Line, both Allied and Axis medical facilities treated more frostbite cases than battle casualties. Falling temperatures further hampered on- and off-road travel by freezing steering columns and engine components, causing mechanical failures that further slowed the Allied advance.

As the war diary of the US 2nd Chemical Mortar Battalion recorded in November 1943, "it was only the beginning of a time when living conditions reached their lowest ebb. There was absolutely no shelter except for caves and slit trenches. It rained and snowed constantly, and cold reigned over all. During the next three-month period, an average of a hundred men of the battalion were sick in the hospital. Fully 10 per cent of the command was rendered inoperative by the weather conditions and poor food. Supplies of winter clothing first went to the infantry, which is as it should be, but no one in the 5th Army seemed to realise that our men suffered the same rigorous hardships in the miserable weather and without the benefit of proper clothing. Many boys felt they would be better off in the infantry, where they could be issued parkas or combat jackets and overshoes."

Using the terrain

The strategic importance of the Liri Valley didn't escape the Germans' attention either. Colonel General Heinrich von Vietinghoff, commander of the German 10th Army, heavily fortified this sector to make good use of the high ground and the excellent observational opportunities it gave.

Indeed, the nature of the terrain formed a key part in the German planning for the forthcoming battles. For example, the Apennine mountain range that ran the length of Italy effectively split the Allies into two separate forces, with the Americans in the west and the British in the east. It was very difficult for these two forces to reinforce and support each other, as the roads through the mountains in Allied-occupied areas were very poor. This was not a problem Field Marshall Kesselring's troops suffered, enjoying access to the far superior road network that passed through Rome itself. He also kept several formations in reserve in the north, and was able to deploy them wherever they were needed.

COMBAT IN THE APPENINES

**(1) Rifleman, (2) Sniper,
(3) Automatic rifleman (BAR).**

The rifle squad in the three mountain infantry regiments was armed with one .30cal M1918A2 BAR, one .30cal M1903A4 sniper rifle, and ten .30cal M1 Garand rifles, three of them with M7 grenade launchers. Before departing for Italy, the division was issued the new olive drab M1943 field uniform (1 & 3), with a four-pocket water-repellent sateen-finish jacket, into which a mohair liner could be buttoned, and loose over-trousers with cargo pockets. This could be worn over herringbone fatigues, or the OD wool shirt and trousers. It accompanied the M1943 field cap and M1943 buckle-top combat boots (thus eliminating the need for leggings), and insulated M1944 shoepacs for cold and wet weather.

The aim was to provide a versatile outfit replacing specialized clothing such as the parachutist and mountain uniforms. The order to relinquish the mountain clothing was resented, but Italy experienced an early spring in 1945, and by the first week of February the new uniforms generally gave adequate protection. Some troops retained the old 1941 Parsons field jacket illustrated here (2), worn with the division shoulder sleeve insignia.

The 10th Lt Div's patch was approved on 7 January 1944, six months after the division was activated, and it was received several months later. Its colours represented the American flag; its shape was that of a gunpowder keg, suggestive of explosive power (some troops called it the 'pickle keg'), and the crossed bayonets represented the Roman X for '10'. Many had hoped for crossed skis, but that was too unconventional for the Army hierarchy (in protest, some soldiers wore the patch upside-down).

The 'Mountain' tab for wear above the patch was approved on 22 November 1944 and received in May 1945. When reactivated as an infantry division from 1948 to 1958, the 10th did not wear the 'Mountain' tab, but when it was reactivated as a light infantry division in 1986, the tab was authorized for purely traditional reasons.





Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

X CORPS ASSAULT

The three Divisions suffered 4,000 casualties in the early days of this ill-fated advance...

The first attack on the Gustav Line was mounted by the British X Corps' 56th and 5th Divisions on the left of the Allied position, near the west coast. On the clear but freezing night of 17 January 1944, and after a major artillery barrage, the 56th crossed the Garigliano river in small boats, pulled across on a rope secured on the far bank.

The crossing itself was uneventful, but soon after they disembarked, the troops came under machine gun and mortar fire from the defending forces of the German 94th Infantry Division, under Major General Bernard Steinmetz. Confusion reigned as the men became separated from their groups. As 19-year-old Fusilier Len Bradshaw put it, "we didn't know what was going on. The night was very much like that."

Panic crossing

The 5th Division crossing nearer the coast was less successful. The Americans crewing the boats were supposed to be guided by landing lights, but the few lights that actually reached the crossing arrived too late to make much of a difference. As they crossed the river estuary, Allied forces were met with German fire while they were still 200 yards from the bank. Several of the boats were swept out of the river mouth into open sea, and in the confusion, a craft full of Fusiliers landed on the wrong bank and came close to attacking their own HQ. But others made it successfully across.

As stretcher bearer Jack Williams remembers, "we got out of the boats, and straight away we had to get up to our objective, which was a farm on the right. We had to get down there immediately – we couldn't hang about on the bank. We could hear the shouts and screams of the people who were thrashing about in the water, who had been hit. It was a bit of a do at the time, and everyone was panicking."

Despite stiff resistance from the 94th and extensive minefields that kept some units bottled up near the riverside bridgehead, the 56th Division's early objective of the hill Colle Salvatito, a mile from the river, was captured

by Len Bradshaw's 9th Fusilier Battalion at about 10 o'clock the following morning. On their right, the 8th Battalion headed for Monte Damiano, a huge and well-defended mountain.

As Fusilier Gilbert Allnutt recalls, "Major Allison set off at our head striding towards the summit at a pace no one could match. Our advance began to look like a sadist's cross-country race for, weighed down by our packs, we grimly tried to keep up with our leader – an impossible task for many... Suddenly shells began to fall in front of us and Major Allison was hit. I see him now, in memory, blood streaming down his face, wounded for the second time, and forced to go back and leave his company."

Fruitless attempts

The 5th Division's bridgehead was less secure, and it had taken such a battering that the 15th Division had to be committed far sooner than was intended. However, by 19 January, the target of Minturno was cleared of enemy units.

A third X Corps crossing, by the 46th Division on 19 January, proved even less successful. It crossed the Garigliano on the right flank opposite Sant Ambrogio, much further up the river, and was to support the US II Corps who attacked across the Rapido, protecting their flank. But this section of the river flowed incredibly fast, sweeping away the landing craft and making it impossible for the engineers to build a bridge. Only a

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We could hear the shouts and screams of the people who were thrashing about in the water”

Jack Williams, stretcher bearer



X Corps Assault

Only a handful of 46th Division troops made it to the far bank despite 14 attempts at a crossing

Calm before the storm: Royal Engineers move up through a smokescreen during training for the crossing of the River Garigliano

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino



Mud, inglorious mud: The Allied advance was severely impeded by the terrain and weather. This British infantry unit is ankle deep in mud



X Corps Assault

“

We had a stretcher chain
reaching over three mountains
with a thousand men”

Bill Quirk, Staff Sergeant

handful of troops made it to the far bank despite 14 attempts at a crossing. This left the II Corps without support.

General Clark briefly considered cancelling the assault across the Rapido the next day. He recorded in his diary, “although the 46th effort would not entirely have protected our left flank, its failure would leave it entirely uncovered during the crossing of the Rapido river.” Major-General Fred Walker, whose 36th Division of the II Corps was set to cross the Rapido, was even blunter in his own diary. After the 46th Division commander came to him to apologise for his failure to cross the Garigliano, he wrote, “his failure makes it tough for my men who now have none of the advantages that his crossing would’ve provided. The British are the world’s greatest diplomats, but you can’t count on them for anything but words.” Despite the unsuccessful crossings it was decided that the attack would still go ahead.

Rescue by mule

Due to the terrain and the weather, mules proved more adept at carrying combat supplies and wounded troops than motorised vehicles. Unfortunately for the X Corps, only around a thousand were available. Although they proved invaluable, it took an average of six hours to get a wounded soldier off the mountains and to a regimental aid post by mule. In some places, the terrain was too difficult even for mules, so the troops themselves had to bear the stretchers.

Staff Sergeant Bill Quirk of 184 Field Ambulance recalls, “we had a stretcher chain reaching over three mountains with about a thousand men – Indian, British, Italian and any others that could be brought in. They were spread out four to a stretcher with varying distances between each team according to the difficulty of the terrain. Each group brought a stretcher anything from 50 yards to a quarter of a mile each and handed it over to the next group and took an empty one back with them... In places the paths were so narrow and steep it was a two-man job, and quite a few were killed by the constant shelling.” Advances were being made, but the cost was high.

One man who knew only too well about this high cost was Lance Bombardier Spike Milligan. Making his way to his battery’s

Battle of Monte Cassino

observation post, he observed, “all around are dead Jerries. Machine gun bullets are whistling overhead as we duck and run inside ... We pass a Sherman tank with a neat hole punched in the turret. A tankman is removing kit from inside. Lying on a groundsheet is the mangled figure of one of the crew. ‘What a mess,’ says the tankman in the same tone as though there was mud on the carpet.” Milligan, of course, later found fame as a comedian, most notably in *The Goon Show*.

Along with the French attack already underway in the north, the X Corps’ advance alarmed General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin, commander of the German XIV Panzer Corps, and the person in overall command of the defence of the south-western section of the Gustav Line. He feared that the 94th Infantry Division couldn’t hold back the attack alone, and that the British would break through in numbers, outflanking the German units at the mouth of the all-important Liri valley. He immediately requested reserves, and Field Marshall Kesselring, who also saw the threat posed by the X Corps, agreed to mount a counter-attack. Two experienced reserve divisions, the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadiers, were sent from near Rome to Colonel General von Vietinghoff, who used them to bolster von Senger’s troops. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was moved along the line too.

German counter-attack

Given the strength of the Divisions brought in as reinforcements, it was inevitable that the German counter-attack would stop the Allied advance in its tracks. And so it proved. The advance by the 5th Division of the British X Corps ground to a halt by 24 January, as they fought not to advance to the Liri valley, but to hold gains already made. General (and later Sir) Richard McCreery, commander of the X Corps, could do little more than pull his troops back to positions from where they could mount an active defence.

In all, the three divisions of the X Corps suffered 4,000 casualties in these early days of the First Battle of Monte Cassino. It has been speculated that if they had more reserves available, either their own or drawn from the US II Corps by cancelling their assault in the centre, a decisive breakthrough could have been made.

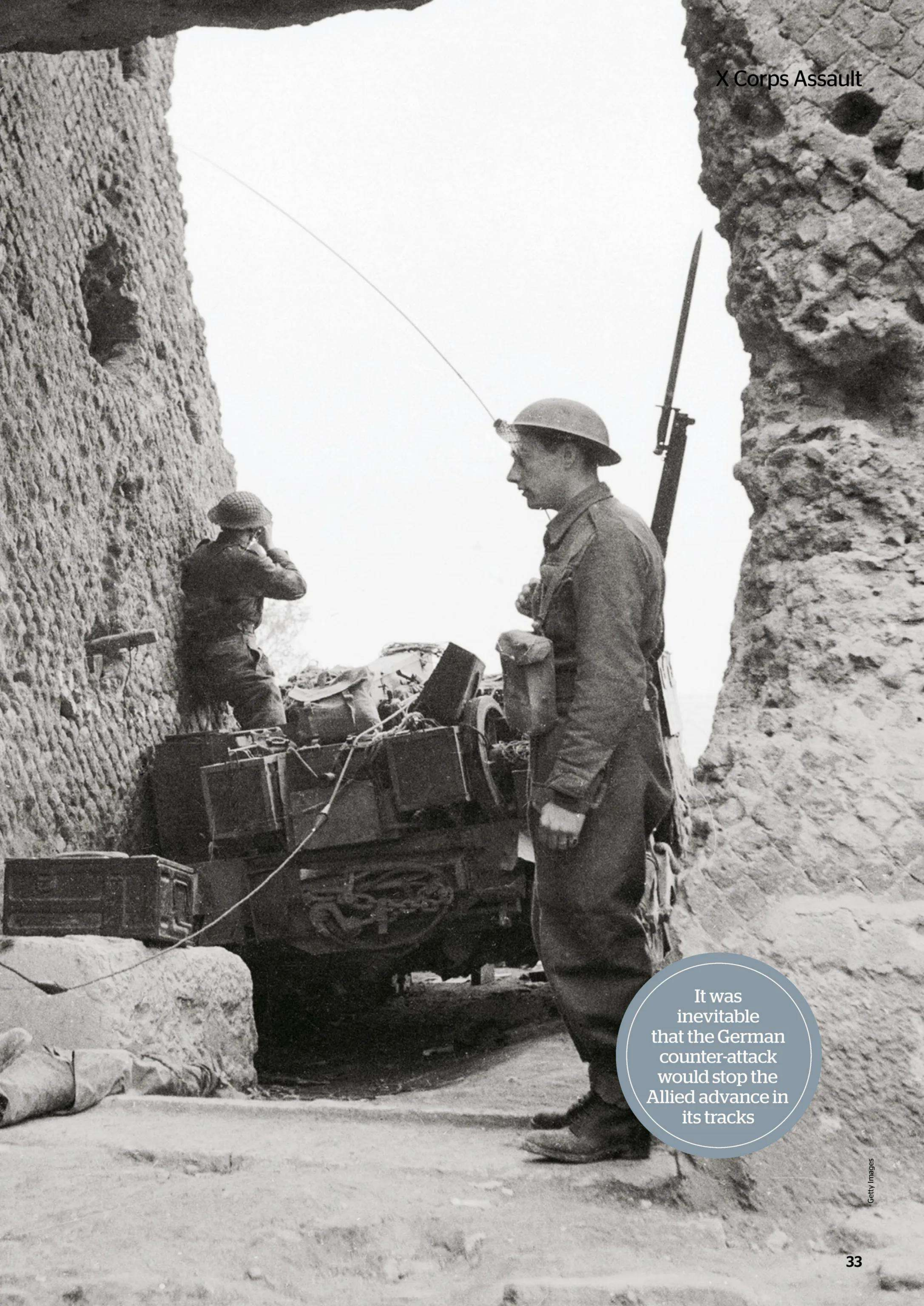
The German 94th Infantry was overstretched, a position appreciated by General von Senger and Field Marshall Kesselring, but which the Allied 5th Army had failed to grasp. But even if an opportunity had been missed, the initial attack had succeeded in one key objective: the Germans had committed their reserves, tying up troops that otherwise could be used to threaten the planned beach landing at Anzio.

“

All around are dead Jerries. Machine gun bullets are whistling overhead as we run”

*Spike Milligan,
Lance Bombardier*

Defence station: Men of the King's Royal Rifles man an observation post in the Garigliano area. Strong German resistance prevented the British assault from breaking into the Liri valley



It was inevitable that the German counter-attack would stop the Allied advance in its tracks

Battle of Monte Cassino



In command: US Lt-General Mark Clark (left), commander of the 5th Army, ordered the Rapido crossing in January 1944 to establish a bridgehead for the US 1st Armored Division



Getty Images

US II CORPS ASSAULT

The 141st and 143rd Regiments were poorly prepared for the Rapido river crossing...

By January 1944, the US 36th Texas Division was not in good shape. After sustained combat at the end of the previous year, each of its three regiments was about 500 men short, despite bringing in new recruits to replace losses. So when it crossed the Rapido River on 20 January, it did so under strength and with a great many untested troops in the ranks.

Their task was to establish a bridgehead so the US 1st Armored Division could cross. This demanded a secure and expansive landing zone, large enough to allow the armoured units to get across the river and regroup without too much congestion, and without the enemy being close enough to observe crossing points and direct artillery fire onto them. Bearing in mind the river was 50 feet wide, 12 feet deep and flowed at around 10mph, this was no easy ask.

Major-General Fred L Walker, commanding officer of the 36th, had his doubts about the plan. He petitioned Lieutenant-General Clark to move the crossing to a position two miles north of Sant Angelo, where the river was fordable, but was told the chosen location, directly opposite Sant Angelo, made it easier for the armoured units to progress into the valley after the crossing. Walker was still not convinced. "Have been giving a lot of thought to the plan for crossing Rapido River some time soon," he noted in his diary. "I swear I do not see how we can possibly succeed in crossing the river near Angelo when that stream is in the [main line of resistance] of the main German position." Despite these

clear misgivings, he would later be criticised for doing too little to take his protests to his superiors and for not demanding that the attack should be called off.

So, the ill-fated crossing and the subsequent attack went ahead as planned. With so little time allowed for preparation, the land around the river was still thick with mines and barbed wire. Also, due to the appalling winter weather, the ground on the approach to the Rapido was marshy and muddy. Driving wheeled vehicles to the bank was impossible. The troops and their equipment, including the landing craft, had to be carried by hand. On the other side of the river there were more minefields, along with concrete defences and trenches. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was dug in, and the crossing was under observation from the heights of Monte Cassino.

“

**I swear I do not see how
we can possibly succeed
in crossing the river
near Angelo”**

*Major-General Fred L Walker,
CO of 36th Texas Division*

Battle of Monte Cassino

Clearing minefields

Working at night, American engineers did what they could to clear the mines from the nearside bank. The Germans had done an impressive job. As one engineer observed, “[The] mine installations [were] generous combinations of anti-tank and anti-personnel mixtures. Operational characteristics of firing devices were numerous. Some fired on either application or release of pressure, or on being tilted. Time delays were effected with time clocks or acid capsules rigged in the device. Others required successive application of pressure. Withdrawal of a pin could activate others. The combinations were without end.” Identifying and neutralising every variety of mine, working in the dark with only a metal probe, was a Herculean task. But they managed to clear and mark a series of eight-foot-wide paths to the bank.

The plan was for the 141st Regiment to lead a crossing to the north of Sant Angelo, and the 143rd to its south. In the north, the 1st Battalion of the 141st would be quickly followed by the 3rd. In the south, two battalions would cross simultaneously. The crossing began at around 6pm on 20 January. As Lieutenant JE Phillips of the 2nd Battalion, 141st Regiment remembered, it was a dark, foggy night, and the troops were already very tired. “Units would move a short distance and then stop. While waiting to move, men would fall asleep and then lose contact. In our company, contact was lost five times. The men were badly confused, and some so new that they were getting mixed up with the other companies.”

When they reached the boats, they found several had already been destroyed by artillery fire, but they picked up the remainder and made their way to the bank. This was no easy task. As Lieutenant Phillips recalls, “few of the men knew how to handle boats. Some would lift the boats right side up and make a lot of noise, half carrying and half dragging them over the ground with their equipment and rifles banging against the sides.”

Disaster and drownings

In the early evening, a 30-minute barrage opened up on German positions over the river, and the Germans responded in kind. Some troops were forced to abandon their boats as enemy shells found their mark. Others lost sight of the cleared paths, blundering into mines or trampling the marker tape those behind were supposed to follow. It's been estimated that about 50 per cent of the boats and bridging equipment never made it to the river bank.

The men who did reach the bank found the crossing itself equally problematic. Unused to river crossings, the troops struggled to control their craft on the fast-flowing river. Many capsized, or simply sank due to shell damage sustained while they were being deployed. As an eyewitness later recounted,



THE US ARMY IN WORLD WAR II: ITALY 1943/44

(1) First lieutenant Field Artillery, 36th Infantry Division

This artillery FO (Forward Observer) from the 36th Division – sometimes called the ‘Texas Army’ – wears the officer’s version of the wool service shirt. Officers’ shirts were usually differentiated by darker colours (anything between standard EM’s drab to a dark chocolate brown), and the inclusion of epaulettes (shoulder straps). This fairly well-dressed first lieutenant wears matching drab shirt and trousers; his branch is shown by brass crossed cannons on his left collar, his formation by the Texas division’s shoulder patch. He is armed with an M1 carbine and a .45 pistol; his binoculars have a russet leather case. It was not intended that the carbine double clip pouch be worn on the weapon stock, but enterprising GIs soon made this modification. The 36th Division landed at Salerno and saw heavy fighting in Italy, eastern France and Germany until the end of the war. The divisional artillery units were the 131st, 132nd and 133rd Light and 155th Medium battalions. Special air-ground FO units – called ‘Rover Joes’ – were also used in Italy; these specialised in calling in air strikes on 15–20 minutes’ notice.

(2) Technician 4th grade 100th Battalion

The 34th ‘Red Bull’ Division was among the first to order its sign to be painted on the M1 helmet. The crack 100th Battalion was made up of mostly Hawaiian Nisei (Japanese-American) National Guardsmen, whose unit motto was ‘Remember Pearl Harbor’. It joined the 34th Division in September 1943, spearheading two divisional attacks on Monte Cassino, and later served at Anzio; the unit subsequently became part of the Nisei 442nd Regimental

Combat Team. (The other divisional infantry were the 133rd, 135th and 168th Regiments.) This Signal Corps ‘tech sergeant’ – who, although a technician, would be addressed as ‘Sergeant’ – is about to check with his wire-laying teams, using the SCR 536 ‘handie-talkie’ radio. This had a single preset frequency and was turned on by extending the antenna; the theoretical effective range was about a mile. Installing lines and fixing breaks could be a disconcertingly hazardous duty under fire. This NCO is lucky to be armed with the M1 carbine – most Nisei carried the heavier M1 Garand throughout the war. His linesman’s leather case containing wirecutters and knife is unofficially embellished with an officer’s full colour Signal Corps insignia. This kit is still in use by the Army, as is the WD-1 two pair field wire.

(3) Staff sergeant Field Artillery, 34th Infantry Division

This artillery NCO serving as an FO is using the leather-cased EE-8B field telephone to call for fire. The handy M1936 musette bag, which he is using as a general purpose haversack, could also be attached to the ‘D’ rings on the web suspenders and worn as a backpack. An L-head GI flashlight is visible clipped to his pistol belt. Though ranked as a ‘staff’ sergeant, this NCO would most frequently serve as a platoon leader, or even as first sergeant in a line combat outfit. Like all but the most senior NCOs he would be addressed as ‘Sergeant’, or even the familiar ‘Sarge’. The workhorse 34th Division was recruited mainly from Minnesota and the Dakotas, and was the first Army division shipped to Europe; its artillery battalions were the 125th, 151st and 175th Light and 185th Medium. The division would serve 517 days in combat in the Mediterranean theatre.



Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

Battle of Monte Cassino

“I could hear the paddles slapping water and hitting together, and then the men yelling when their boat turned over. It curdles your blood to hear those men drown.”

Progress was slow. By 6:30am on 21 January, only around half the 141st was across the river. When communication between the two banks was cut off by shellfire, the 3rd Battalion was stopped and the troops who had already crossed were ordered back. Yet with hardly any boats remaining and only one bridge successfully erected, retreat was impossible. As a private put it, “these German guns kept going all the time. They knocked out every pontoon bridge the engineers tried to put up. They knocked out the footbridges, and they knocked out a lot of the boats. It was a tough thing to look at.”

The 143rd fared better, facing fewer mines and less opposition than the 141st. Even so, after ferrying a platoon of the 1st Battalion across the Rapido, enemy fire intensified. By early 21 January, almost all the battalion was across, advancing over half a mile, but as the morning broke, attacks intensified and they were soon pinned down by enemy fire. Despite a request for withdrawal being refused, their commander brought them back anyway and by 10am everyone in a position to return had done so. With daylight preventing further crossings, the troops retreated to their starting points.

Second attempt

Walker and Clark insisted another attack be mounted immediately, this time supported by tanks. This second attempt was initially more successful, getting the majority of two battalions over the river and constructing two footbridges. Engineers got to work on a Class 40 bridge, capable of carrying armoured vehicles, but the trucks that delivered the sections kept getting bogged down in the mud on the way to the river. By the morning of 22 January, the heavy bridge had still not been built, the footbridges had washed away and the men who had made it to the opposite bank had suffered huge casualties. By evening, all those still alive had been captured, the bridgehead had been lost and the attempt to punch through the Gustav Line to the Liri valley had failed.

The second attempted crossing had failed to draw any further German reserves into the battle, and keep them from attacking the bridgehead landing up the coast at Anzio. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Battalion simply didn't need reinforcing on the Rapido. It's difficult to see what was gained by the 36th Texas Division's heroic but ultimately futile attack, but very clear what was lost. In two days, 2,100 men had been killed, wounded or were missing.

As one Company Commander put it, “I had 184 men; 48 hours later, I had 17. If that's not mass murder, I don't know what is.”





Mud and blood: The 36th Texas Division's unsuccessful attack on the Gustav Line resulted in a huge number of casualties

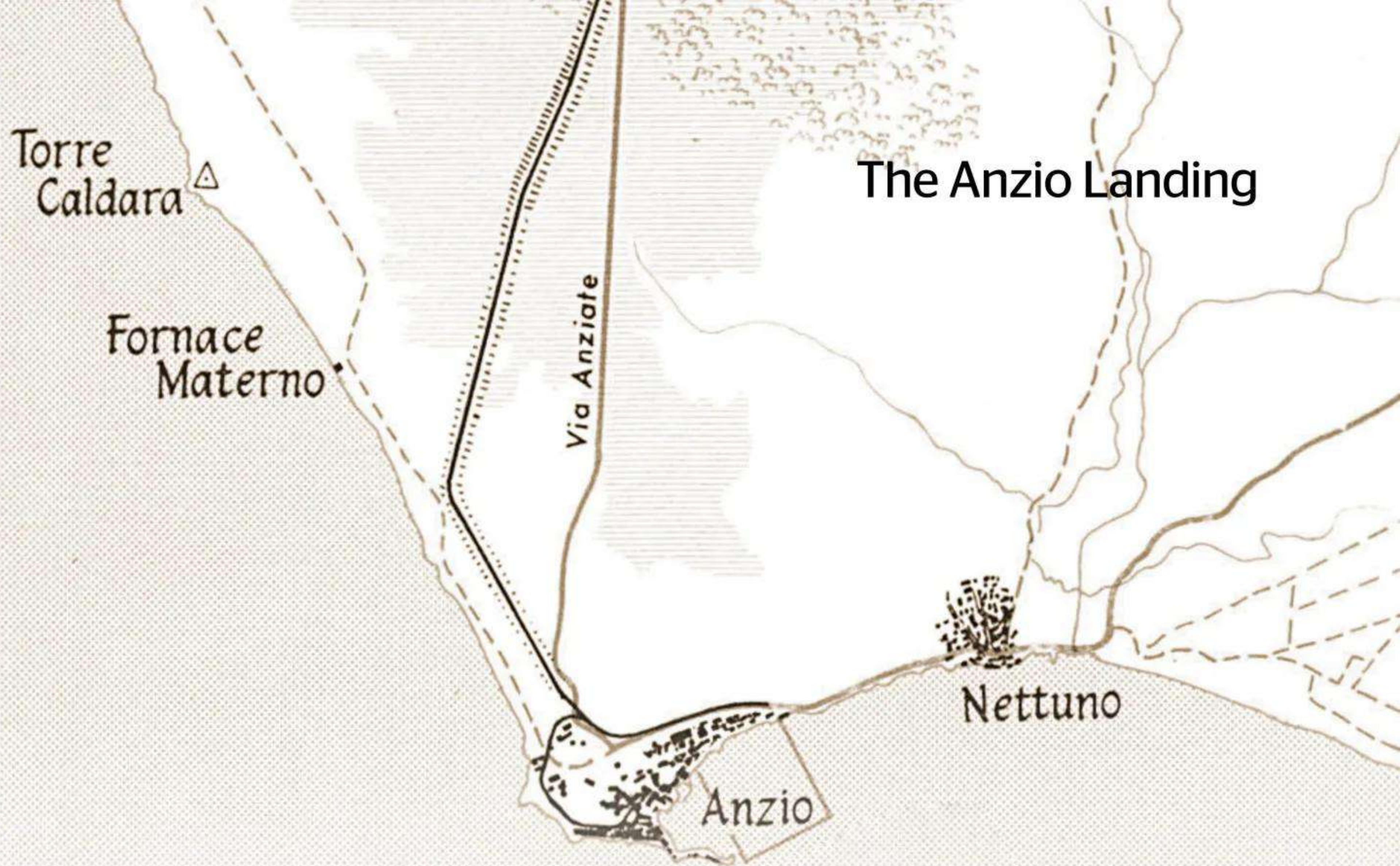
Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino





Operation Shingle: An American soldier coming ashore at Anzio, January 1944. The Allies met virtually no German resistance



THE ANZIO LANDING

At last, at Anzio the tide turned in favour of the Allies – but the opportunity was wasted

The attempt to force a crossing of the Rapido had failed and, unlike the X Corps assault, had not caused Field Marshall Kesselring to commit any reserves. But had it succeeded in distracting the Germans enough to lift the pressure on Operation Shingle, the beach landing at Anzio? In the early hours of 22 January, the Allies would find out.

The plan for Operation Shingle was a simple one. By landing two forces either side of the coastal town of Anzio, around 60 miles north of the Gustav Line, the Allies could go around rather than through its extensive defences. By approaching its rear, they could trap the defending German troops and threaten their supply lines. To the north of Anzio, the 2nd Brigade of the British 1st Division and 2nd Special Service Brigade would land on Peter Beach. The 6615 Ranger Regiment, commanded by Colonel William O. Darby and supported by the US 509th Parachute Battalion, was to approach the built-up areas and secure the towns of Anzio and the nearby Nettuno. To the south of Nettuno, the US 3rd Division would land all three of its regiments, namely the 7th, 30th and 15th, on X-Ray Beach. In

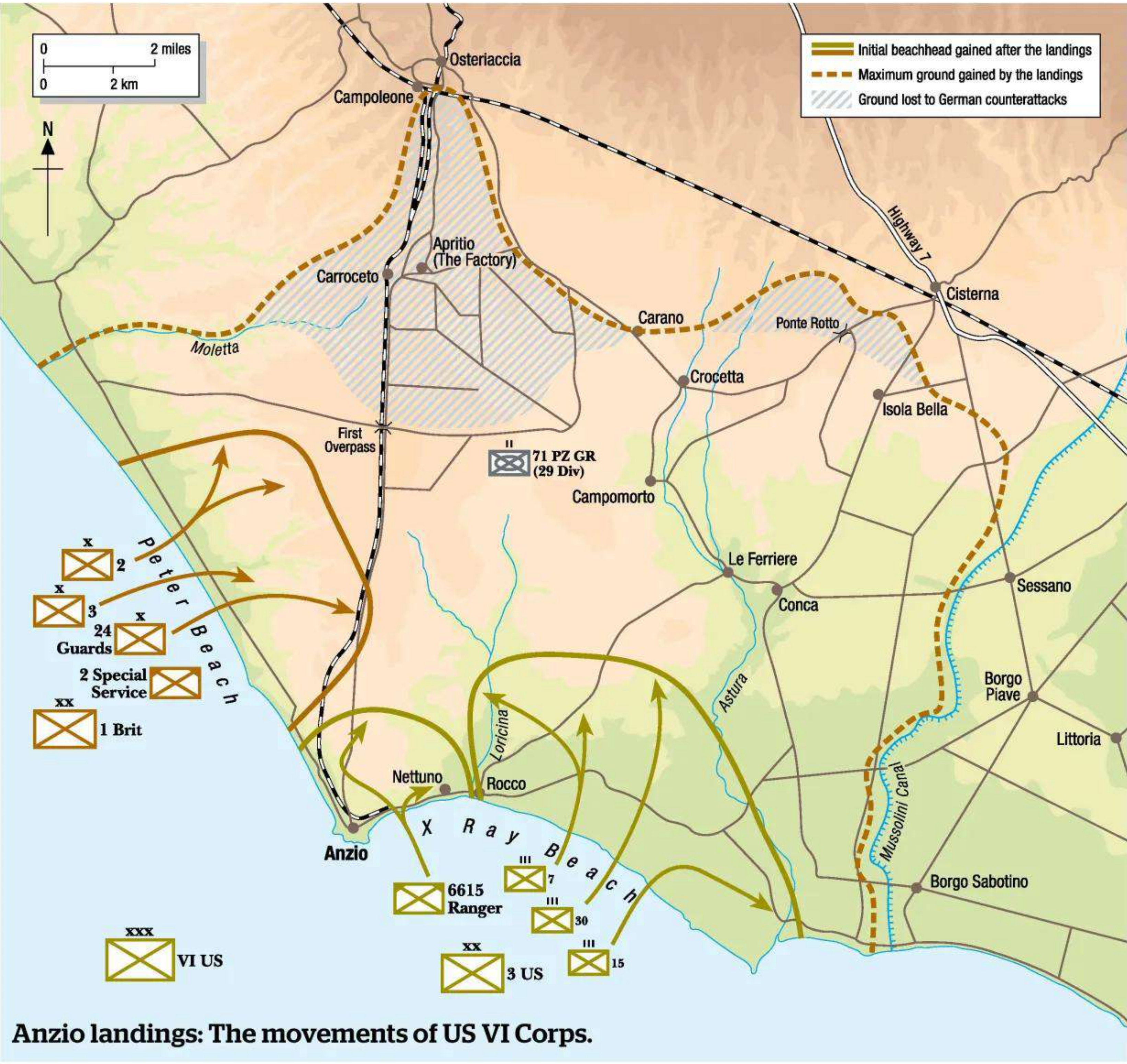
overall command of the VI Corps was General John P. Lucas.

Despite an almost total lack of aerial reconnaissance, Field Marshall Kesselring realised a beach landing was imminent. The build-up of ships in Naples had been observed, but he had no idea when and only a rough idea of where the landing would occur. On the three nights before Operation Shingle, he had put his troops in Italy on invasion alert, but fearing they were being worn out, he lifted this order on the very night of the Allied landings.

Kesselring's Chief of Staff, General Siegfried Westphal, met with Admiral Canaris, head of German counter-espionage, on 21 January. Westphal later recalled, "his opinion of the enemy's amphibious intentions was urgently sought. Above all, we wanted to know the number and whereabouts of warships, aircraft carriers and landing vessels. Canaris was unable to give figures in detail, but firmly believed there was in any case no landing to be feared in the near future. It is evident that it was not only our aerial reconnaissance that was practically paralysed, but the counter-espionage system as well. The enemy landed at Anzio and Nettuno a few hours after Canaris' departure."

The landing was a spectacular success, with no resistance. The Germans had been taken completely by surprise

Battle of Monte Cassino



Surprise attack

The landing was a spectacular success. The leading forces faced virtually no resistance as they took the beach. The towns were taken and secured without difficulty, and the second wave of troops, along with the VI Corps' vehicles and supplies, landed unopposed and on time. The Germans had been taken completely by surprise. By noon, the beachhead was being expanded according to plans, securing a significant portion of land where they could base their operations.

Lieutenant Edward Grace of the Gordon Highlanders remembered the landing well. "At last we could feel the crunch of the ship touching the sand underneath," he said. "The ramps came down, and then I, as the officer of the platoon, jumped into the water. There was nothing but darkness, and there was no sound at all. And then at last, one single German soldier came running down without any weapons. Of course, we captured him and asked him [what was going on]. He was very polite. He explained to us that all his battalion had been moved, and he was left behind because he was repairing a couple of broken-down vehicles." As 22 January drew to a close, around 36,000 Allied troops had been landed, with only 13 casualties.

Churchill was ecstatic. When a telegram from General Sir Harold Alexander, Commander in Chief of the Allied Armies in Italy, promised that General Lucas would push quickly inland, he replied, "I am very

glad you're pegging out claims rather than digging in beachheads."

The Germans learned of the landings around an hour after they began, and although Kesselring was concerned – there were only two German divisions between the beachhead and Rome, just 22 miles away, and their anti-invasion reserves had been committed to stopping the X Corps' assault over the Garigliano – he was not unduly alarmed or surprised. Realising the landing threatened the high ground at the Alban Hills, which if lost would render the Gustav Line untenable, he sent the 4th Parachute Division (which wasn't fully assembled) and the available units of the Fallschirm Panzer Division (most of which had been deployed against the X Corps) to block the route to the Hills. He also contacted Berlin to request reinforcements, and Hitler agreed to release the 715th Division from France and the 114th Jäger Division from Yugoslavia. A new division, the 94th, was also created from replacement battalions in the north of Italy. His own 65th and 362nd Divisions were also moved. In all, eight divisions were deployed against the landing, none of which had been withdrawn from the Gustav Line.

Delayed advance

Major General Lucas was mindful of Lieutenant General Clark's warning about sticking his neck out. He was determined to secure the beachhead, which he also expanded to accommodate the arriving



Minimal resistance: A German mine explodes during the Allied landings at Anzio as landing craft head for the beach, however the Germans had deserted the town



Battle of Monte Cassino

supplies and equipment. By 24 January, it was seven miles deep and 16 miles wide. But no plans had been made to press on inland as General Alexander expected. It was five days before he called together his divisional commanders to make plans for an advance “some time soon.”

Lieutenant Grace was bewildered by this inaction. “We thought, why couldn’t we have marched on in those first few days to Rome? There seemed to be no opposition whatsoever. We might just as well have sent the Germans a postcard.” By the end of January, the beachhead held 70,000 troops, 356 tanks and 18,000 other vehicles, but by this point they faced 95,000 Germans. As military historian Richard Holmes put it, “All the advantage of surprise had been lost, and the sacrifices made in the attacks on the Gustav Line were wasted.” A furious Churchill said, “[I hoped] we were hurling a wildcat on the shore, but all we got was a beached whale.”

Allied attempts to break out of the beachhead failed. They were pinned down, and would remain so for several months. Instead of the Anzio landings threatening the rear of the Gustav Line, relieving the pressure on the Allied forces at Cassino, it did the exact opposite as attacks had to be maintained against the heavy German defences to relieve pressure on the now-surrounded beachhead. Instead of an asset, it had become a liability.

Not everyone agrees that a rapid advance would have broken the German lines. A shortage of ships made it difficult to reinforce Anzio at speed; the Germans could certainly bolster their forces more quickly, with potentially disastrous results for the advancing Allies. Although a severe critic of Lucas, 1st Infantry Division commander Major-General WRC Penney conceded, “We could have had one night in Rome and 18 months in [prisoner of war] camps.”

But even if this view is accepted, two things remain clear. The landings at Anzio wasted resources that could have been deployed elsewhere, and the need to take the pressure off the beachhead made it impossible for the attackers at Cassino and elsewhere on the Gustav Line to rest, regroup and wait for the spring to launch fresh attacks, when better weather would make it easier to put their armoured vehicles to good use.

“

I hoped we were hurling a wildcat on the shore, but all we got was a beached whale”

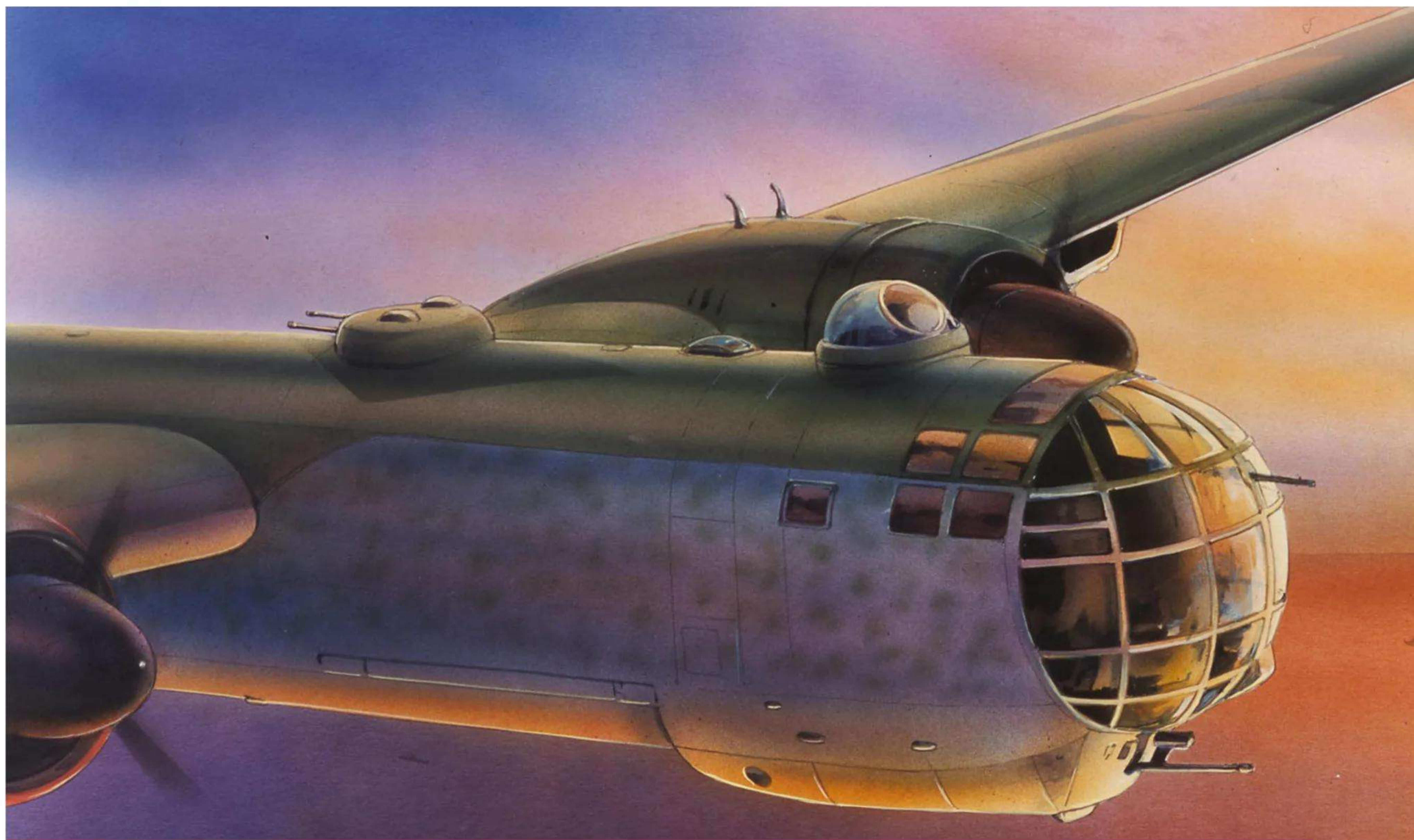
Winston Churchill



The Anzio Landing

Invasion: American ships arrive off the coast of Lazio on 22 January 1944. By the end of the day 36,000 men have been put on X-Ray Beach near Anzio, with only 13 casualties





ATTACKING THE FLEET, DUSK 24 JANUARY 1944

While Kesselring raced to reinforce the Anzio sector, he depended on the Luftwaffe to keep the Allied forces at bay. One of his trump cards was the missile armed-bomber armed with new precision guided weapons, including the Fritz-X guided bomb and the Henschel Hs-293 guided missile (1). Guided weapons had proven very effective in their combat debut five months earlier off Salerno. During the Anzio campaign, the II/Kampfgeschwader 40 was based in southern France and equipped with the new He-177A Greif heavy bomber (2).

The squadrons began their long-range attacks on 23 January 1944 at dusk, when there was less threat of Allied fighters and the fleet's ships were still visible. The bombers sometimes carried out night attacks, with a portion of the bombers carrying special parachute flares that would illuminate the fleet during the attack. Each bomber carried two Hs-293 missiles. The missiles were radio guided, with the operator in the nose of

the bomber steering the missile remotely using a small joystick control. There was a bright flare mounted on a rear brace on the missile which helped the operator locate the missile.

The missiles were fairly primitive by today's standards, both mechanically unreliable and difficult to steer accurately. The operator needed excellent spatial perception to determine the relationship between the missile and the target ship. Since the missile was usually released at a range of a mile or more from the ship, to keep the bomber out of anti-aircraft gunfire range, the missile and target were often difficult to spot.

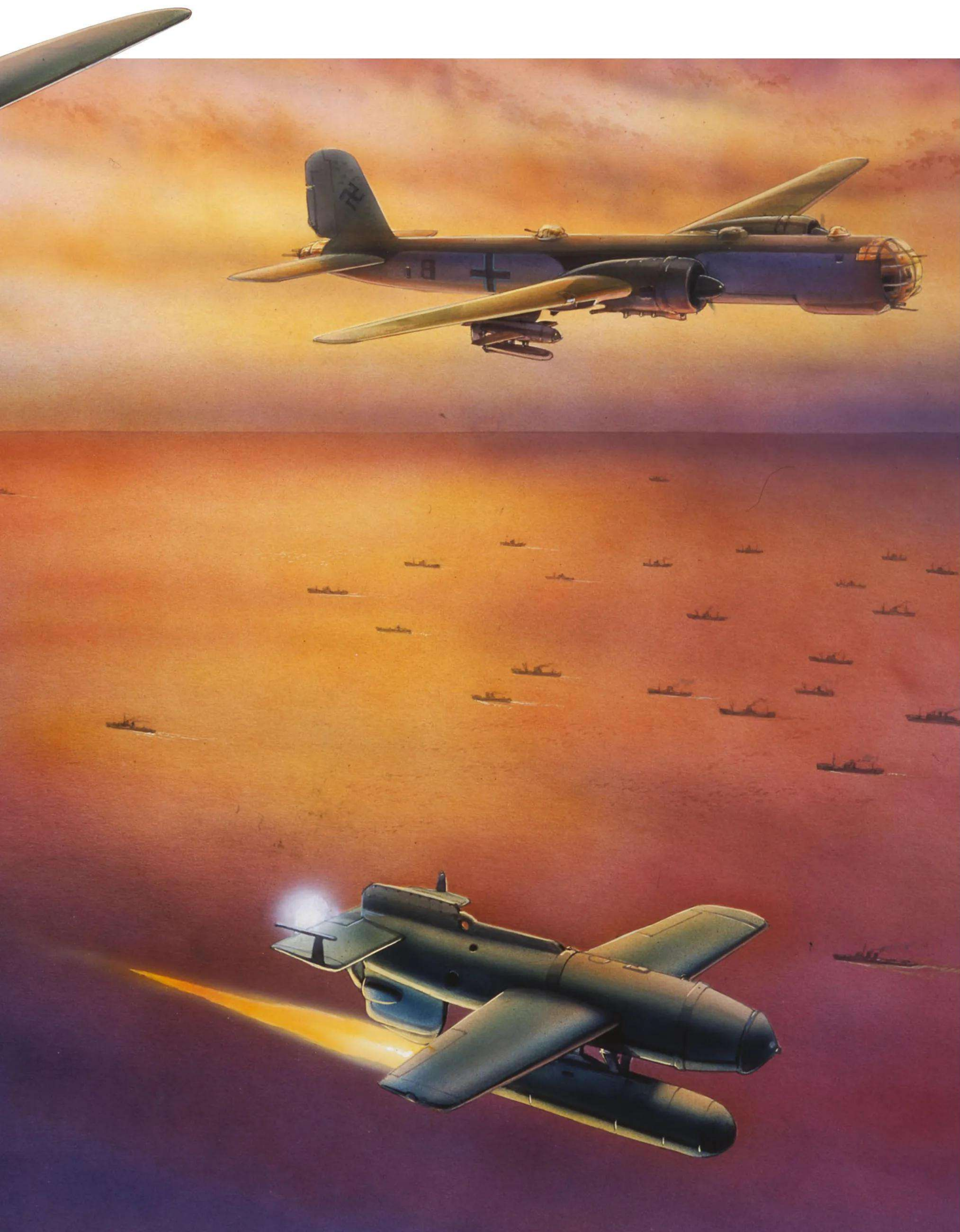
In addition, the Allies had determined the missiles' guidance method during the Salerno campaign. They began to deploy radio jammers onboard some of the ships, which interrupted the command signal between the bomber and the missile. This was the earliest example of electronic warfare in the missile age. However, the counter-measures were not always effective, since the operator

could select between several pre-determined channels.

Another significant problem was the basic unreliability of the early missiles, which suffered from electrical short-circuits, engine and other mechanical problems, due to the severe buffeting the missile experienced when strapped to the wing of an aircraft.

Although the missile attacks against the fleet scored few hits on major warships, they had important consequences for the Anzio operation. The mere threat of the missiles convinced Allied naval commanders to send many of the cruisers back to Naples as soon as possible to avoid losses, and generally the destroyers off Anzio were sent further to sea every day in the late afternoon to make them less easy to locate and attack.

The presence of the bombers helped diminish the naval firepower available to the VI Corps ashore, and naval gunfire support was much less effective at Anzio than it had been at Salerno, in no small measure due to the missile threat.



TAKING THE HIGH GROUND

The Allied forces attempt to make gains in the area around Cassino, but despite heroic battles and bloodshed fail to capture their key objectives

With the Anzio beachhead stalled, both Lieutenant General Clark and General Alexander were stung into action. To stop the Germans moving even more troops to Anzio, throwing the Allies there back into the sea, Clark kept up the pressure on Cassino.

After the disastrous attempted crossing of the Rapido, he was unable to mount another attack on the entry to the Liri valley. Instead, he ordered the US II Corps to cross the Rapido further north, with the 34th Infantry Division under Major General Charles W. Ryder leading the assault and French colonial forces acting in support on his right flank. General Alphonse Juin, commander of the French Expeditionary Corps, and X Corps commander, General Sir Richard McCreery, were told to do whatever they could to press home attacks in their own sectors in support of the crossing, but having failed to make a bridgehead themselves, there seemed little the X Corps could achieve.

Crossing the Rapido upstream of Cassino was theoretically easier than it had been for the 36th near Sant Angelo. At least it was fordable. But it was also flooded, making the banks and lowlands on either side difficult to traverse. Naturally, the Germans had installed mines and cut down all the trees and shrubs to remove cover, leaving the Allies exposed before their machine gun emplacements.

After crossing the river, the 34th was to take Cassino from the north, and also thrust into the Liri valley from the Cassino Massif. Their first target was a hill known as Point 213, and a small barracks around two miles north of Cassino. According to the division's official history, *The Story of the Famous 34th Infantry Division*, "the mission of the 34th was to cross the Rapido, penetrate the hills, and then strike south, with one column to advance down the road and enter Cassino, while other elements were to gain the heights above and to the rear of the city, finally debouching to the enemy's rear in the vicinity of Piedimonte. It was a prodigious and ambitious assignment."

Writing after the war, General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin criticised the piecemeal,

one-strike-at-a-time approach the Allies had adopted. "When I look at the Allied plan for a breakthrough from the point of view of the defender, I cannot refrain from criticism," he wrote. "According to the original plan, which was tactically well thought out, there was to be an attack against the right wing of my corps, followed by a number of blows against the Cassino front. But after the first attack failed, the original plan was followed through too rigidly. This gave me the chance to draw reserves from the sectors where the attacks had failed, to constantly change the operational boundaries of the divisions, and to parry the blows one by one. Nor did I understand why the enemy attempted to break through at so many points of the front. It seemed to me in doing so he was dissipating his forces."

The area was, of course, dominated by the famous Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino. Founded in the sixth century, it was an internationally important religious site, but could also have proved a very useful observation point for the German forces. As Sergeant Bill Hawkins of the Essex Regiment observed, "it seemed as though it was looking down at you because it was in such an overpowering position up there."

Would Field Marshall Kesselring keep his word and leave it unmolested? Senger, in charge of the defences on that section of the Gustav Line, was a lay member of the Benedictine order and had evacuated its treasures before the start of the battle. But the Allies remained suspicious.

Battalions battered

On the evening of 24 January, two battalions of the 133rd Regiment crossed the Rapido supported by tanks. They attempted to bring down the high far bank by peppering it with explosive shells, but it remained unbroken. Despite the mines and barbed wire, they reached the barracks, which consisted of around 20 ruined but heavily fortified single-storey blocks, only to be pushed back during the daylight hours.

Despite the mines and barbed wire, they reached the barracks, only to be pushed back during the daylight hours





Watchers on the hill: French
generals Charles De Gaulle and
Alphonse Juin among officers
studying German positions from a
hill overlooking Cassino.





The Anzio Landing

At the end of 25 January, the 3rd Battalion had crossed the river, but only a small bridgehead had been secured. The following day, a company from 1st Battalion 135th Regiment managed to get across, but attempts to reinforce the bridgehead with tanks foundered when the lead vehicles became bogged down, blocking the way for those behind them.

One notable story was that of the 100th Nisei Battalion of the 133rd Regiment, which was drawn from the Hawaiian Army National Guard and staffed by Japanese-American troops. Keen to prove their loyalty at a time when Japanese-American citizens were frequently treated with suspicion, the battalion had fought with distinction in the crossing of the Volturno earlier in the Italian campaign. At dawn on 26 January, it was their time to attack once more, again proving their courage despite taking heavy casualties.

As Sergeant Takashi Kitaoka remembered, “The very next morning, one of my jobs as first sergeant was to check the number of men we had. We went into that valley with 187 men; that’s a full complement of a company. In 24 hours, when I checked our company, there were only 28 men left and I was one of the 28. That’s how much hell we caught.”

Point 213 was first taken in the early morning of 28 January by a single company of troops, but the foothold on the hill was so tenuous the company commander decided to withdraw before daybreak, when he felt his position would become untenable. Later that day, another crossing that was more suitable for tanks was found. By the afternoon, a considerable amount of armour had crossed the river, and the hill was eventually taken.

Third strike lucky

The barracks was also taken, with the 133rd cleaning out its defenders before sending its 3rd Battalion south towards Cassino, supported by tanks from the 756th. After two unsuccessful attacks, a third strike took the hill known as Point 175, overlooking the town. As the divisional history records, “in three days of terrific fighting the 34th had made momentous gains. Not only had we won a great area to the rear of Cassino, but troops were now entrenched in the northern part of the city itself.” After several days of intense fighting and heavy casualties, the 34th Division had managed to push back the defenders and establish a position in the mountains, but it was no crushing victory.

On the right flank, the French colonial forces made good progress at first, pushing back General Julius Ringel’s German 5th Mountain Division. On 25 and 26 January, Monte Marrone was taken by Moroccan troops, Monte Belvedere and the Abate Hills by Tunisians, and Propaia was captured by Algerians. To prevent their flank becoming exposed, Lieutenant General Clark ordered

the 142nd Regimental Combat Team, under Brigadier General Fredrick Butler, to attach itself to the 34th and help the French. In worsening weather, this unit captured Manna Farm and pressed south towards Monte Castellone, forcing the Germans to deploy fresh reserves, the 211th Grenadier Regiment of the 71st Infantry Division. Although the attack was making progress, and could have opened a more direct route to Cassino, General Juin’s own call for reinforcements was declined.

The 4th Tunisian Tirailleurs mounted a heroic defence of their gains at Monte Belvedere, an important piece of high ground that was essential for protecting the 34th

“

His forearm has been shot off by a shell, but for half an hour he leads the company, dragging it behind him”

French war account

Division’s flank, with sections changing hands several times during their attack and German counter-attacks.

General Juin wrote in his memoirs, “I do not know if in the annals of the French army, in the course of its entire history, there has ever been a feat more striking, nor actions more heroic, than those accomplished by the 4th Tunisians at Belvedere.”

Tunisian Lieutenant el Hadi typified the bravery and sacrifice of the troops at Belvedere. According to a French account written soon after the war, the hill had been captured twice, only for the Germans to retake it both times. A wounded French officer passed command to el Hadi, who launched another attack. “His forearm has been shot off by a shell, but for half an hour he leads the company, dragging it behind him. A veritable flag to his men, he shrieks and carries on like a madman. The small groups advance step by step. They arrive at the summit. At that moment Lieutenant el Hadi is blasted by a machine gun bullet that pierces his body. He shouts to the Tirailleur Barelli who is just next to him, ‘You, send up a flare.’ Then he collapsed and crying up to the heavens, ‘Vive le France,’ he died on the conquered peak.”

Despite such heroism, without the requested reserves General Juin’s overall attack lost its momentum, and was halted without capturing the key objective of Monte Cifalco, a strategic high point from which the enemy had a clear view of both the French and American flanks and supply lines.

Battle of Monte Cassino



Donkey work: The Allies were forced to use mules to ferry provisions and arms to troops fighting on the mountain slopes surrounding Cassino, including at Snakeshead Ridge



SNAKESHEAD RIDGE

How extreme weather, impossible terrain and well dug-in German forces frustrated Allied ambitions

After heavy fighting, the Allies – most notably the US 34th Division – had crossed the Gustav Line defences and battled their way into the mountains behind the town of Cassino.

Although their position was not a commanding one, it was time to press on to take the Cassino Massif, the mighty mountain 1,700 feet above Cassino, capped by the iconic monastery founded by St Benedict. In the way was another piece of high ground, Snakeshead Ridge. The ridge's highest point was a hillock known as Monte Calvary, or Point 593, which was topped by a ruined fort that lay around 2,000 yards from the monastery's rear entrance. This ridge was occupied by the 3rd Battalion of the German 3rd Parachute Regiment, commanded by Major Rudolf Kratzert, and they wouldn't be easy to dislodge.

By 4 February, the Allies had fought their way onto the ridge, where they faced concentrated and determined enemy action. According to Lieutenant John Buckeridge of

the Royal Sussex Regiment, "[the Germans] made the best use of every rock, cranny and cave, and they knew the tracks which we had to use, and they covered all those tracks with machine gun fire and shelling." And the path along the ridge to the ruined castle wasn't easy going. "On one side of the ridge was a sheer drop down into the valley, and on the other side were these great clefts in the rock where you just couldn't go. You had to be on the top, and the flat bit was quite narrow."

The troops attacking on the ridge quickly found the territory inhospitable. Unable to dig in due to its hard rocky surface, they built 'sangers' by digging small hollows and piling rocks around them. By day they were pinned in (or behind) these sangers by mortar and machine gun fire; by night, half frozen due to a worsening of the weather and aching from the cramped conditions, they had to fight uphill and half blind. "There was never a time that we were free of intermittent or heavy mortar fire," explained infantryman Donald Hoagland. "We took lots of counter-attacks up there. You have your men placed

expecting that you are going to be hit. It was always at night, and they came in quietly to get as close as they could. All of a sudden there's bodies moving out there in front of you. Every night there would be another attack and although we were able to beat them all off, eventually it's fatigue that hits you as much as anything."

Supplies also became a problem. The closer the Americans got to the fort and the monastery, the further food and ammunition had to be carried, on mules or by hand as the terrain made vehicular access impossible. The German defenders, on the other hand, had had time to blast shelters out of the rock face and stockpile supplies.

Casualties were appalling, and it was a long way down off the ridge for those who needed medical assistance. As journalist Gordon Gammack reported, "in deep snow banks, up and down rocky, slippery, treacherous slopes there was established here during the first two weeks of February probably the longest litter train for the evacuation of the wounded in the history of the American army."

Battle of Monte Cassino





THE RAPIDO VALLEY

American infantry and tanks attack across the Rapido Valley during the First Battle for Cassino

When the US 36th Division failed to cross the River Rapido and into the Liri valley south of Cassino, Major-General Ryder was ordered to make an attack over the river to the north of the town with his 34th Infantry Division. Ryder's unit was a National Guard division raised mainly in Minnesota and the Dakotas. Its divisional patch was a red buffalo's skull on a black background (1) giving it the nickname of the 'Red Bull' Division. Ryder selected his 133rd Regiment to carry out the operation, with its 1st and 3rd Battalions attacking across the valley towards the area of the Italian barracks, between the river and the mountains.

With the river valley dominated by the mountains to the rear, the Germans could easily observe all activity in front of Cassino. Monastery Hill (2) towers above the Rapido and Liri valleys, while Point 435 – Hangman's Hill (3) – guards its southern slopes. To the right, Point 593 – Snakeshead Ridge (4) – bars the route towards the Abbey across the mountains from the north. Close above the town, the medieval ruins on top of Castle Hill (5) cover the direct route up to the summit of Monte Cassino from the east.

The 133rd Regiment's attack was supported by the 54 medium and 17 light tanks of the US 756th Tank Battalion. Here, an M4A3 Sherman (6) from the battalion has bogged down in the soft ground. The operation's start line was over a mile away from the Rapido, near the village of San Michele. The Americans had to advance across the valley floor, liberally sown with mines, over ground that had been flooded by the Germans by diverting the natural course of the river (7).

The attack started at 22.00hrs on 24 January with little success. Exploding mines disorientated the troops and the tanks became bogged down in the mud, some infantry reached the river but could not establish themselves because of enemy fire. The next day, Ryder sent in the remaining battalion of the 133rd Regiment, the 100th Battalion. This also failed and further attempts were made over the following days, with more infantry and tanks being introduced into the battle, until Ryder had nine battalions of infantry and three battalions of tanks committed to the operation.

Eventually, on 29 January, the division did get troops established over the Rapido and into the village of Cairo. Then began the struggle to gain entry into Cassino (8) and to advance across the hills behind the town towards Monastery Hill. It is interesting to note that the 133rd Regiment's 100th Battalion was composed of over 1,500 Nisei Americans of Japanese descent. In September 1943, this battalion replaced the regiment's original 2nd Battalion. The enlistment of Japanese-Americans into combat units was controversial, but the battalion eventually earned itself an enviable reputation in battle. (Howard Gerrard)

Battle of Monte Cassino

Continued from p53

While the majority of wounds were caused by mortar fire (medics reported surprisingly few from machine gun fire, which mostly served to keep the troops' heads down), trench foot also became a problem. Caused by prolonged exposure to the wet and cold, trench foot could occur in as little as ten hours, and render a soldier unable to walk. The feet became numb and red, and blisters and sores appeared, which could become infected by fungi. If left untreated for too long, the foot could be lost.

Breakthrough delayed

As military historian Richard Holmes said, "there are limits to what flesh and blood can stand, and the number of Americans up here dwindled day by day. There was no hope of reinforcement. All other Allied divisions were at full stretch at Anzio or against the Gustav Line." On 8 February, General Alexander told Lieutenant General Clark to bring his men down. Clark delayed the order for three nights, hoping for a breakthrough. But by now the men of the 34th were exhausted, physically drained by lack of food and sleep, and stressed beyond endurance by the demands of the battle. Attacks were

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The men of the 34th were exhausted, drained by a lack of food and sleep, and stressed beyond endurance...”

Richard Holmes, Historian

planned and then postponed as the troops expected to carry them out were incapable of locomotion.

Lieutenant General Clark tried one last time to make the breakthrough. On 11 February, he called on the 36th Division's 141st Regiment to clear the gorge between Snakeshead Ridge and Phantom Ridge, which ran parallel to Snakeshead and had already been taken by the Americans. They were then to press on to the monastery. They were told Point 593 and the ruined fort were already in American hands, but on reaching the ridge they found the closest Allied positions were still 100 yards away.

As a result, another attack was planned by the 34th, intending to take the hill and allow the 141st to proceed into the valley to the right of this position. Perhaps inevitably, this attack failed to materialise. What was left of the 34th was in no position to advance. Instead, on 11 February, they were relieved by

28 January 1944: Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, commander of the US 5th Army, talks to reporters on the beach near Anzio



Battle of Monte Cassino



6 February 1944: Smoke rising from Castle Hill during the battle of Monte Cassino. Both the castle and the monastery behind it were eventually completely destroyed by the Allies



Snakeshead Ridge

the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 141st, and an attack was planned for the following day.

The arriving troops immediately faced a German counter-attack. According to Bill Everett of the 141st Regiment, “we started up the trail in a blinding rain, and it turned into snow. We got there late at night. We moved into position in the driving snowstorm. The next morning, all hell broke loose. We lost the company commander and a couple of guys early that first morning. I just told the guys, ‘hang on. Somebody wants this hill pretty bad. Let’s hang on and hold it’. We soon lost the rest of the officers and most of the enlisted men. The officer situation was so bad in our outfit they were going into hospitals and getting guys that had been wounded at the Rapido River and bringing them back up.”

Incredible bravery

Losses were catastrophic. It was estimated that by the end of the day, the total strength of the 1st and 3rd Battalion was around 20 officers and 150 troops, down from around 70 officers and 1,600 troops.

Bowing to the inevitable, the Americans were withdrawn from the ridge and replaced by fresh British, Indian and New Zealand troops from the 8th Army. Fred Majdalany, a company commander in the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, was full of praise for the efforts of the 34th Division. “[It] must rank with the finest feats of arms ever carried out by any soldiers during the war,” Majdalany later wrote. “When they were finally relieved by 4th Indian Division, 50 of those who had held on until the last were so cold and numb that they could not move. They were still able to man their positions, but had to be carried out on stretchers.”

But elsewhere in the mountains, gains were made. A useful position near the hamlet of San Onofrio had been taken by American infantry, and this was only around a mile away from the abbey. A reconnaissance squadron made it right up to the abbey walls and took 14 prisoners from a nearby cave, while the monks watched Americans and Germans exchanging fire. However, the key assault on the massif itself had proved impossible while Point 593, Snakeshead Ridge, remained in enemy hands.

Battle of Monte Cassino

C Rations for the German POWs: At an Anzio beachhead POW Holding Center, a German prisoner of war is issued C Rations by a US Army private. Other German POWs watch from the barred window at right. C Rations consisted of two cans, one (the M Unit) contained a meat and vegetable dish and the other (the B Unit) contained bread (usually crackers), desert, a powdered beverage, and condiments





WITHDRAWAL AND REPLACEMENT

Exhausted US troops were taken off Snakeshead Ridge, but the British 8th Army fared little better

On 11 and 12 February, the American forces on Snakeshead Ridge were withdrawn. They had fought bravely in almost unimaginably bad conditions, but were simply exhausted.

General Alexander gave the order to replace them with fresh troops from his other army, the British 8th Army, a multinational force that drew troops from the British Empire and Commonwealth as well as from Britain itself. It had subordinate units from Australia, British India, Canada, Free French Forces, Greece, New Zealand,

Poland, Rhodesia and South Africa as well as the UK.

Traumatized and suffering from exposure, the troops from the 36th Division were moved 500 yards further back on the ridge, and the battered remains of the 34th were taken off the ridge altogether. By now, they were in a terrible shape. As Sergeant Don Hoagland remembers, “as I was a first sergeant I took a responsibility, so I was going to be the last one off. I watched them come down and I can’t imagine men being in any worse shape than that bunch. They were like zombies shuffling along. They

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“I can’t imagine men being in any worse shape than that bunch. They were like zombies shuffling along”

Sergeant Don Hoagland



Corps HQ, Anzio: An American military policeman salutes General Alexander, the Commander of the Allied Armies in Italy

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino



All smiles: British soldiers at the Anzio landings. The operation started so well but was ultimately a significant and costly failure



Withdrawal and Replacement

not our company alone; it was all of them. It was just continual lack of sleep, continual pounding, continual action. It was a nasty, nasty battle in a nasty, nasty war.”

Fought to exhaustion

Lieutenant John Buckeridge of the Royal Sussex Regiment saw the Americans coming down from the ridge. “They were really exhausted,” he recalls. “They had fought themselves to a standstill, and they had nothing left in them. In fact, if they had been asked to get on and attack again, I don’t think they had the energy to do it.”

General Alexander could not afford to yield territory to the Germans. The pressure had to be kept up. The 4th Indian Division, an experienced unit that included elements from the Royal Sussex Regiment, was to replace the men evacuated from the ridge, along with the 2nd New Zealand Division of the New Zealand Corps, under Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg.

One of the soldiers who replaced the Americans on the ridge was Lieutenant Buckeridge. “The sangers we took over from the Americans were probably not more than 12 or 18 inches high, barely high enough for a person to sit up without their heads protruding over the top,” he later told the BBC. “Soon after first light, one of my corporals was shot in the head by a sniper from a ridge about 400 yards away across a valley. In the morning, my own batman, sitting with me in my own sanger, was shot and killed.”

And the 8th Army troops were no more successful at digging in than the Americans had been. As Stanley Tann of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment recalls, “Although we were issued with shovels to dig in with, they were useless. When incoming fire started, there was no time to dig in, you just got as flat as possible and hoped for the best.” The

Gains were slight. The Gustav Line had been tested, and other than a few very minor breakthroughs, it had held

withdrawal of the Americans from Snakeshead Ridge and their replacement with 8th Army troops marked the end of the First Battle of Monte Cassino. All that remained was for a two-hour truce on 14 February – Valentine’s Day – for both sides to collect their dead.

The 34th Division’s astonishing exploits earned them praise, and unnerved the enemy. During the height of the battle, the German commander on the Gustav Line, General von Senger und Etterlin, had considered withdrawing his troops to a new defensive line north of the Anzio beachhead, but Kesselring refused. So, he reinforced the 15th Panzer Grenadiers with the 71st Infantry Division instead of relieving it. He was being forced to commit more of his forces to the

Battle of Monte Cassino



line. But the cost was heavy. By the time they were withdrawn, the US 34th Division's infantry battalions had sustained losses of around 80 per cent, approximately 2,200 casualties overall.

The other two Allied corps that had attempted to break the Gustav Line were also in poor shape. The British X Corps on the left flank had suffered over 4,000 casualties, but had only won a small bridgehead over the Garigliano. General Juin's French Expeditionary Corps had made more significant gains in the mountains behind Cassino, but had fought themselves to a bloody standstill, the exhausted and depleted units unable to make further progress.

The preliminary battle

Indeed, gains had been so slight the Germans have referred to the First Battle of Monte Cassino as 'the preliminary battle'. The Gustav Line had been tested, and other than a few very minor breakthroughs, it had held. What's more, the Germans now knew where their weak points were, and

could bolster and reinforce their defences in these sectors. But could the battle have gone differently?

Stanley Tann of the 1st Sussex certainly thinks so. "Cassino was a real hell," he explained "It was so well defended they should have just gone round it in the first place, as we eventually did when we got through the Gothic Line."

It has been suggested that had more been done to capitalise on early successes, a decisive breakthrough could have been achieved. For example, what if Major-General John P Lucas had acted more decisively after the Anzio landing, and followed General Alexander's expressed orders instead of Lieutenant-General Clark's informal urge for caution?

Had he pressed inland and taken the high ground at the Alban Hills as instructed, could he have disrupted German supply lines, threatened their rear and flanks, and made the Gustav Line defenders' position impossible? Or was his inaction the mark of a prudent man, who realised the danger

Cassino was a real hell. It was so well defended they should have gone round it"

of his own forces becoming trapped if he moved before a large enough beachhead was secured? Others point to the disagreements between Clark and Alexander, and their inconsistent – perhaps even contradictory – ideas on how Operation Shingle should have proceeded, and the lack of planning and training ahead of the landings.

A costly mistake

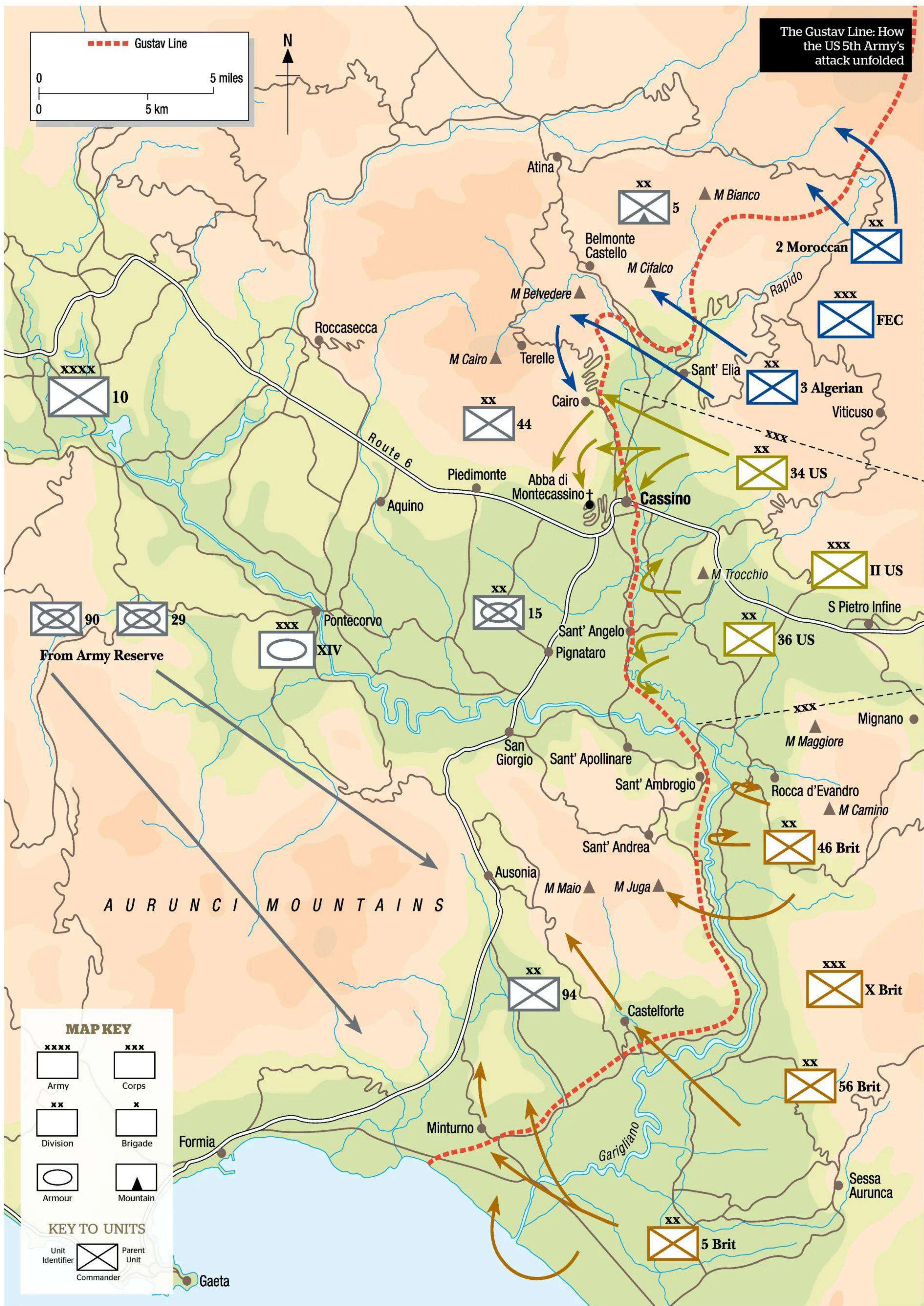
But whoever was to blame, it's clear that Anzio was ultimately a mistake, a drain on resources that could have been better used elsewhere and a liability for the troops attacking the Gustav Line, who could not wait for better weather more suitable for their tanks and other vehicles, for fear of freeing up German troops to threaten the beachhead. As Professor Richard Holmes put it, "far from Anzio helping the Allies breach the Gustav Line, attacks on the Gustav Line would have to be launched to take the pressure off Anzio. The tail had begun to wag the dog."

Likewise, could the French, if reinforced, have made more significant gains in their own sector on the right flank, getting behind Cassino in sufficient numbers to break in and take the town? While the answer to this question is almost certainly 'yes', it still leaves the issue of where these reserves should have been drawn from, and what effect this would have had on the sector that had relinquished them.

While it's far too easy to be wise after the event – 70 years later, from the comfort of our armchairs – perhaps the German commander on the Gustav Line, General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin, had a point when he criticised Allied tactics during the First Battle of Monte Cassino. He questioned the wisdom of the piecemeal approach adopted by the Allies, trying to break through the line in several sectors instead of making one decisive breakthrough and exploiting it to maximum effect. But one thing's for sure: Allied planners had failed to take sufficient account of the Italian terrain.

While it would be unfair to expect them to predict such a cold winter, it was clear the rugged, mountainous battlefields held too many surprises. As the Monte Cassino campaign reached the middle of its second month, the Allies had to learn from their mistakes.

Withdrawal and Replacement



THE SECOND BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

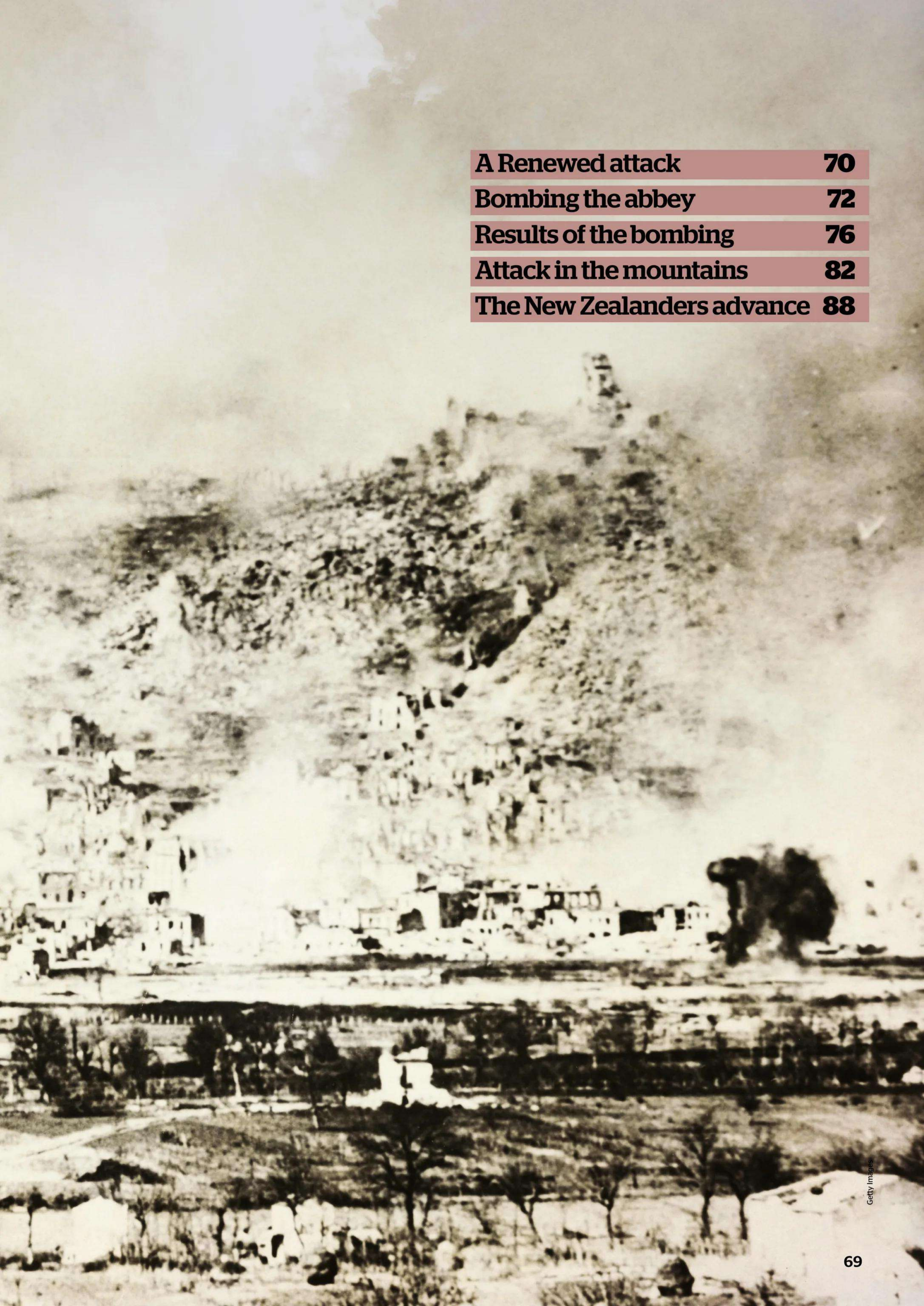
15-18 February 1944

The first assault on the town of Cassino, the mountain of Monte Cassino (also known as Monastery Hill) and the German defensive Gustav Line in general, had ground to a halt, with the Allies taking huge casualties but making little gain. The US VI Corps had secured its

beachhead around the town of Anzio, but had failed to strike out and capture the Alban Hills, sever German supply lines, threaten the rear of the Gustav Line's defenders or press on to Rome. Instead, Major-General John P Lucas had built up his troops and secured his beachhead defences, allowing the

Germans time to build up their own forces in the area, effectively trapping him in the beachhead. As historian John Keegan put it, he had "achieved the worst of both worlds, exposing his forces to risk without imposing any on the enemy". It was time to prepare for a new assault...





A Renewed attack 70

Bombing the abbey 72

Results of the bombing 76

Attack in the mountains 82

The New Zealanders advance 88

PREPARATIONS FOR A RENEWED ATTACK

Indian and New Zealand forces were sent to the Gustav Line to help relieve pressure at Anzio

Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg commanded the Indian and New Zealand Divisions. His New Zealand forces would operate in the sector between Cassino Station and Colle Belvedere, with the 4th Indian Division playing a crucial role in the mountains.

He was under intense pressure to mount another strike to draw German forces onto the Gustav Line and give the trapped VI Corps at Anzio some breathing space, but Brigadier Harry Dimoline, acting commander of the 4th Indian, was having problems getting his units into position. The mountains and valleys around the town of Cassino were not easy to traverse, and the troops had to be supplied using mules led along goat tracks, in full view of the monastery. Although there was no clear evidence the monastery itself had been occupied by German observers, the extremely accurate artillery fire being directed at the attackers led the Allied HQ to suspect it was.

As Major General Kippenberger, commander of the New Zealand 2nd Division later admitted, “poor Dimoline was having a dreadful time getting his division into position. I never really appreciated the difficulties until I went over the ground after the war.” It was yet another example of a senior officer underestimating the Italian terrain.

Lacking the time to make elaborate plans, General Alexander and Lieutenant-General Freyberg’s intentions were to continue roughly in the same vein as the First Battle of Monte Cassino. An attack along the mountain ridges to the north would capture the mountain and the abbey, and a strike south-east along the railway line would secure the railway station south of Cassino, with the two attacks surrounding the town and giving access to the Liri Valley, and therefore Route 6 and ultimately Rome. This double strike was to be known as Operation Avenger.

General Alexander summarised his strategy thus; “my plan now was for the 4th Indian Division to capture Monastery Hill while the New Zealanders would seize a bridgehead over the Rapido. The Corps would then exploit up the Liri Valley, but this was not to start until the weather conditions were favourable enough to allow the movement of armoured forces off the roads.” It seemed the importance of good (or at least better) weather was at last being understood.

Target: Monte Cassino

The plan demanded the Indian troops capture and secure Point 593, arriving via Snakeshead Ridge, which meant Cassino itself would be bypassed. From there, they would launch an attack on Monastery Hill, or Monte Cassino, from where the imposing Benedictine abbey gave a clear view of the surrounding land. After the New Zealanders had crossed the Rapido and captured the railway station, the tanks of Combat Command B (CCB) of the 1st US Armored Division would smash through the gap in the enemy lines and hammer their way into the Liri Valley.

The plan had to be executed with haste. The weather had taken a turn for the worse, with rain, sleet and snow turning battlefields into a muddy mess once more. As Lieutenant John Buckeridge remembers, “it was unbelievable. Always raining or snowing or sleeting, one was permanently sopping wet.” While this was an issue for both sides, it was worse for the Allies, who were attacking through mud and rain while the Germans had pre-installed shelters to protect them from the elements.

Naturally, the enemy had not been idle in the aftermath of the First Battle of Monte Cassino. Facing Freyberg’s corps were 14 German infantry battalions, two tank companies, four field artillery batteries, one medium and one heavy artillery group, a battalion of anti-tank gunners and a

single company of anti-tank troops. It was a formidable force.

The 4th Indian Division was faced by the German 1st Parachute Regiment commanded by Oberst Karl-Lothar Schulz, which consisted of four battalions, two of which were borrowed from other regiments. Defending the railway station was the 211th Regiment, with two of its own battalions and one borrowed from the 361st Panzer Grenadier Regiment.

Freyberg was not confident about the operation’s chances of success, telling his superiors the odds were no better than 50 per cent. NC Phillips’ Official New Zealand History of the Second World War agrees. “Reconsidered in terms of infantry actually engaged in launching or repelling the assault,” it records, “the odds against the Germans almost shrink away. At those points in the German lines which it had chosen to breach, the New Zealand Corps was far from able to bring to bear a crushing weight of numbers. In the initial heave that was to topple the enemy defences, the Indians enjoyed a superiority in battalions of perhaps four to three, whilst the New Zealanders fought numerically on about equal terms, so narrow were the attackers’ avenues of approach.”

Given the strength of the German defensive positions, these were not good odds.

“

It was unbelievable. Always raining or snowing or sleeting, one was permanently sopping wet”

Lieutenant John Buckeridge



Kiwi contingent: New Zealand soldiers taking a break by an armoured personnel carrier. The odds were against them as they attacked the well entrenched German lines

Getty Images



BOMBING THE ABBEY

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence of German occupation, the Allies decided they had to attack the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino

The bombing of Monte Cassino was one of the most controversial Allied actions of the Italian campaign, maybe even the war. The German command declared a 300 yard exclusion zone around the Benedictine abbey, forbidding its troops from entering it or using the magnificent building as part of the defensive lines. The Allies had agreed to respect this.

But as the fighting drew closer, the German commander on the western sector of the Gustav Line, General von Senger und Etterlin, whittled away this neutral zone and eventually constructed defences right up against the abbey walls. Also, the building, a religious shrine of international importance, was in such a strategic location that some Allied officers felt he wouldn't resist using it as a defensive structure and observation

post. Several civilians claimed to have seen Germans in the monastery. There were a few reports from enlisted soldiers too; one claimed he'd been sniped at from the building, another said he spotted the glint of field glasses in a window. Small arms fire had also been heard in the vicinity.

An intercepted radio message implied there was an entire battalion of German troops in there. Newspapers on both sides



Bombing the Abbey

Controversial raid: The Allied bombers dropped 1,150 tons of explosives on the abbey at Monte Cassino on 15 February 1944

of the Atlantic ran stories – often of dubious origin – stating that the abbey had been occupied, such as the Daily Mail’s headline of 11 September, ‘Nazis Turn Cassino Monastery into Fort’.

Evidence of occupation

General Ira C. Eaker, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, flew over the building on 13 February and reported seeing “a radio mast... German uniforms hanging on a clothesline in the abbey courtyard and machine gun emplacements 50 yards from the abbey walls”. General Maitland Wilson, who had succeeded

Even if they weren’t there, for how long could the Germans resist taking over such a strong defensive position?

General Eisenhower as the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, flew over the abbey on the same day, and claimed “irrefutable evidence” that the monastery had been incorporated into the German defensive line.

But not everyone agreed with this assessment. Major General Geoffrey Keyes of the US II Corps flew over the monastery on several occasions, and reported no enemy activity there at all. Of earlier reports stating the opposite, he said, “they’ve been looking so long they’re seeing things.”

But even if they weren’t there, for how long could the Germans resist taking over such a

useful observation post and strong defensive position? According to New Zealand Corps’ Major General Kippenberger, “if [it’s] not occupied today, it might be tomorrow, and it did not appear it would be difficult for the enemy to bring reserves into [the monastery] during an attack, or for troops to take shelter there if driven from positions outside. It was impossible to ask troops to storm a hill surmounted by an intact building such as this, capable of sheltering several hundred infantry in perfect security from shellfire and ready at the critical moment to emerge and counter-attack.” He felt bombing the abbey was the only solution.

“Undamaged, it was a perfect shelter, but with its narrow windows and level profiles, an unsatisfactory fighting position. Smashed by bombing it was a jagged heap of broken masonry and debris open to effective fire

Battle of Monte Cassino

“

Clark was given, a direct order to carry out the attack: “I said, ‘You give me a direct order and we’ll do it,’ and he did”

Lieutenant-General Clark

from guns, mortars and strafing planes, as well as being a death trap if bombed again. I thought it would be more useful to the Germans if we left it unbombed.”

Tucker's concerns

According to Lieutenant-General Freyberg's plans, Major General Francis Tucker's 4th Indian Division was to lead the ground assault to capture Point 593, and then move on to Monte Cassino, the mountain topped by the monastery. As an officer, Tucker had a real concern for his men, and was keen they should have every advantage as they fought their way up. Looking closely at what they were being asked to do, he saw they needed to attack uphill on Snakeshead Ridge, which dropped sharply over a precipice on one side and was etched with ravines on the other. It was terrain well suited to defence. Fearing his men would be massacred, he argued that attacking the monastery head-on was a mistake, and it would be better to take the mountains north of Cassino and sever the German supply routes. The terrain was also difficult there, but his Indian and Moroccan troops were ideally suited to its challenges. His requests were denied; the attack would go ahead.

Tucker then researched the monastery. Finding no detailed intelligence on its layout at the US 5th Army HQ, he looked further afield. Searching Naples bookshops, he eventually found an 1879 volume about its construction. What he read convinced him a bombing raid was an essential prerequisite to a ground attack.

Taking the same line as Major General Kippenberger, he wrote to Lieutenant-General Freyberg, arguing that regardless whether the monastery was currently occupied by the Germans, it should be destroyed to prevent its future occupation. He also noted that given the monastery's construction, with walls 150 feet high and at least 10 feet thick, it was impossible for field engineers to blow it up from the ground. It had to be an aerial attack. Its robust construction, he argued, also meant 1,000lb bombs would be “next to useless”. Instead, the bombers should drop ‘blockbuster’ bombs, high-capacity devices with very thin



casings, allowing three quarters of their weight to be made up of explosives. These bombs weighed 4,000lb each, and contained 3,000lb of amatol, a highly explosive mixture of TNT and ammonium nitrate. He further said he would not attack unless “the garrison was reduced to helpless lunacy by sheer unending pounding for days and nights by air and artillery”.

Not for the first time, Lieutenant-General Clark was at odds with his commander, General Alexander. Clark opposed the bombing, arguing there was no convincing evidence that the enemy had occupied the

building. But Alexander felt it was in the interests of the men on the ground that it be bombed. Clark sought, and was given, a direct order to carry out the attack: “I said, ‘You give me a direct order and we’ll do it,’ and he did.”

Early raid

The bombing was to take place during an expected break in the bad weather on 16 February. On 14 February, ahead of the raid, leaflets were fired by Allied guns on the monastery and surrounding area, warning it was to be bombed and advising the monks to

High places: German commander General von Senger und Etterlin at the Monte Cassino abbey. There was no time to evacuate the remaining monks and civilians before the air strike

Getty Images

leave. "With very heavy hearts we are going to have to turn our weapons on the abbey."

By this time, the Germans had evacuated most of the monks, leaving only five, along with their 80-year-old Abbot, Gregorio Diamare. But hundreds of refugee civilians had entered the building to escape the war. Starvation and disease was rife.


Asking the Germans for help, Abbot Diamare was told his monks and the refugees would be evacuated at night on 15 February. But it proved too late. The weather broke early, and Allied intelligence had predicted an attack on the beachhead at Anzio on 16

February. As the bombers would be needed to support the VI Corps, the raid on the monastery went ahead a day early. A swarm of 142 B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers, followed by 47 B-25 Mitchell and 40 B-26 Marauder medium bombers, dropped 1,150 tons of high explosive and incendiary bombs on the abbey. Later in the day, the attack was followed by 59 fighter bombers and intense artillery fire.

Lieutenant John Buckeridge of the Royal Sussex Regiment watched the raid from below. "We could hear a droning in the sky. We looked up and we saw a great horde of

American Flying Fortresses coming our way. We saw the bomb doors open and the bombs coming down. The whole ground shuddered under the great weight of the bombs. Great clouds of dust and smoke came up from the monastery building, and now and then we saw great bits [of masonry] going into the air as a result of an explosion. It really was very frightening.

"When all the smoke and dust had cleared, this very regular building had been reduced to ruins with jagged walls and gaping holes. But the foundations at the very bottom still appeared to be absolutely intact."



RESULTS OF THE BOMBING

The destruction of the abbey had the opposite of the intended effect, affording the Germans both an observation post and defensive position

No warning of the early raid had been given. As a result, the refugees were still inside the monastery. Around 230 were killed, including many women and children. But despite the incredibly aggressive bombing, there were survivors. The monks had descended deep into the abbey's vaults, where they were safe, but had to dig their way out after the bombing. Sources differ about how many civilian refugees survived, but most put the figure somewhere between 40 and 150.

Due to repeated artillery barrages after the main aerial raid, all survivors who were fit enough to move (or at least be carried) left the ruined monastery at 7:30am on 17 September. Carrying a cross and reciting the rosary, the frail old abbot led them down a goat path towards the Liri Valley until they reached a German first aid post. The severely wounded were taken away in a military ambulance, and the monks were driven to Sant Anselmo, a church in Rome with an attached Benedictine abbey.

Propaganda opportunity

Before they reached Rome the survivors were intercepted by the SS, who were keen to use the abbot to make propaganda capital out of the bombing raid. General von Senger und Etterlin wrote in his post-war memoirs, "the weary old man was dragged off to a big transmitting station, where he was not even given a meal. Here he had to give an account [on the radio] of the difference in behaviour between the Germans and the Allies. Tired, hungry and dejected, the abbot was dragged into the German embassy in the Vatican,

where he was asked to sign a memorandum that bristled with propaganda against the Allies. The abbot refused to put his name to such a document."

Despite the incredible tonnage of bombs that were dropped on the monastery – which the New York Times described as "the worst aerial and artillery bombardment ever directed against a single building" – the bombing still was not heavy enough to completely destroy it. The foundations were indeed intact, and much of the upper building remained standing. However, that is not to say the damage to the monastery hadn't been absolutely devastating.

Lieutenant Heinrich Daiber, the German officer who had received the abbot and the refugees, said it was "as if the mountain had disintegrated, shaken by a giant hand". The abbey's central courtyard was destroyed, and the priory dominated by a huge crater. The basilica was also ruined, including its magnificent frescoes, and all around art treasures such as murals, carvings and statues lay smashed.

A British artilleryman who was flying overhead in a spotter plane observed, "the sight that confronted us will never be forgotten by all who witnessed it. The monastery was unrecognisable." Thankfully, the bones and artefacts of both St Benedict and his sister St Scolastica were in the crypt of the main monastery, and were unharmed by the bombing.

Yet despite the extensive damage and huge number of civilian casualties, there is no evidence that even a single German soldier was killed inside the monastery itself. That's not to say no Germans were killed by

the bombing. The bombers flew at a high altitude, and due to the inaccuracy of World War II-era dumb bombs, it's been estimated that only around 10 per cent of them landed on the monastery itself.

Those that missed the target killed scores of Germans in the surrounding hills, but because no warning had been given about the early bombing raid, Allied troops were also hit. Forty men from the Indian Division were killed, and General Clark himself almost became a casualty. Sixteen bombs fell on the 5th Army compound at Presenzano, 17 miles from Monte Cassino. Clark was doing paperwork in his trailer when they landed just yards away from where he sat.

Snakeshead survives

One place where few, if any, bombs seemed to land was Point 593, that all-important piece of high ground on Snakeshead Ridge that remained in German hands despite several Allied attempts to dislodge them.

"The sight that confronted us will never be forgotten by all who witnessed it. It was unrecognisable"
British artilleryman

Results of the Bombing



Rescue mission: Monks salvaging religious artefacts and historical books from the ruins of the bombed abbey

Getty Images



Home advantage: German soldiers occupied the abbey ruins immediately after the Allied air strike, turning it into an armed fortress



Results of the Bombing

The planned Allied attack on the monastery would therefore still have to break through this entrenched position.

One clear result of the bombing was that with the monks evacuated, the German forces were no longer bound by the agreement – which was unknown to the Allies at the time – that the abbey would not be used for military purposes as long as the monks were there. As they had now gone, German paratroopers immediately occupied what was left of the building. As historian Richard Holmes said, this gave them a considerable advantage. “[The bombing] had turned [the abbey] into a labyrinth of ruins, ideal for the German defenders. [They] occupied it immediately, making the monastery an armed fortress.” With the Royal Sussex Regiment about to follow up with a ground attack, a second heavy bombing raid to dislodge the occupying paratroopers was out of the question. In their zeal to deny the Germans a fortified observation post and defensive position at the highest point in the mountains, the Allies had presented them with exactly that, as well as destroying a magnificent building and gifting the enemy a propaganda coup.

The pope, Pius XII, made no comment about the bombing, but his Cardinal Secretary of State, Luigi Maglione, was more outspoken. He told the US diplomat to the Vatican, Harold Tittmann, that it was “a colossal blunder,” and “a piece of gross stupidity”.

Lost in translation

In hindsight, it's pretty clear the Germans had not occupied the monastery prior to its bombing. Every investigation after the event has concluded only monks and refugees were there. As Abbot Diamare stated after his evacuation, “until the destruction of the Monte Cassino abbey there was within the area... neither a German soldier, nor any German weapon, nor any German military installation.” Two abbey officials signed documents that made similar statements.

Embarrassingly, the intercepted broadcast suggesting a German battalion was in the monastery was found to be the result of a translation error by a junior officer. In the intercepted radio transmission, a German parachute commander had been heard to ask “Ist Abt in kloster?” and was answered, “Ja in kloster mit monchen.” The question was translated as “Is HQ in the abbey?” and

the answer was simply recorded as “Yes.”

A senior British intelligence officer, Colonel David Hunt, checked the message and found the translator had wrongly assumed ‘Abt’ was an abbreviation of ‘Abteil’ (battalion or unit), when in fact it was short for ‘Abbot’. Correctly translated, the message read, “Is Abbot in monastery?” and the answer was “Yes in monastery with monks.”

Unfortunately, the error was only discovered when the planes were already in

“

It was an awful tragedy. It was idleness by the man who read the intercept. War is a balls-up”

Brigadier Bryan Watkins

the air. As Brigadier Bryan Watkins said, “it was an awful tragedy. It was idleness by the man who read the intercept. I don’t find the story at all hard to believe. War is a balls-up... Both the Allied and German sides had given undertakings to the Pope that they would not destroy the monastery. We know from records that [General] Alexander was very conscious of Allied responsibilities under this agreement. The intercept, in its mistranslated form, implied the Germans had broken their word. That exonerated the Allies and served as a green light for the bombing.”

But this doesn’t mean the bombing was unjustified. As Major General Kippenberger and Major General Tucker – who had fallen seriously ill and handed over command to Brigadier Harry K. Dimoline – pointed out, even if there were no Germans in the monastery, that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t occupy and fortify it at a later date. But any evidence or report that it was occupied before its bombing is flawed. The bombing of the monastery is still, and probably will always remain, extremely controversial.

Happily, the building was not lost forever. After the war, the Monte Cassino abbey was rebuilt, and reconsecrated by Pope Paul VI in 1964.

Battle of Monte Cassino

Sad irony: The deciding factor for bombing the monastery at Monte Cassino was to protect nearby Allied forces on the ground from attack by German troops who were thought to be inside the abbey. After the strike it became clear that the Germans had kept their word and not occupied the abbey – but now the monks were gone German paratroopers were able to swiftly move in and establish a defensive stronghold among the ruins. The Allies had brought about what they were trying to prevent





ATTACK IN THE MOUNTAINS

Three successive nights' assaults on Snakeshead Ridge failed to take Point 593 from the Germans

The Royal Sussex Regiment followed the bombing of the abbey with a ground attack at night-time, tackling the German positions at Point 593 on Snakeshead Ridge, after which the mountain assaults could progress forwards on to Monte Cassino itself. Unfortunately, as the bombing raid had gone ahead early, the Sussex Regiment wasn't ready. Only a single company of the 1st Battalion was available, which sources put at between 63 and 70 men in total.

"We were to attack and take Point 593 with a view to the battalion passing through and trying to take the monastery," said Lieutenant John Buckeridge of the Royal Sussex Regiment, "the monastery now being reduced to rubble and the Germans being in defensive positions. C Company got up from their sangers to attempt to wheedle the Germans off 593."

They crept forward quietly, aiming to surprise the German defenders, whose forward defensive lines were around 70 yards away from the Sussex starting position, with the summit of Point 593 around a hundred yards further back. But keeping silent in the dark proved impossible due to the loose stones littering the narrow summit of the ridge. At a distance of around 10 yards, the Germans launched an attack with machine guns and grenades.

Lieutenant Buckeridge remembers the attack well. "Once you got onto Point 593 you were being shot at from probably three different directions, and you didn't actually know where they were coming from. Just beyond it there's a sheer drop, and some soldiers just fell over the top. Two officers and 32 men were written off, either wounded or killed or captured that first night."

The Allied attackers quickly ran short of grenades, largely because two lorry loads of the battalion's ammunition had failed to arrive. After several attempts to press forward proved unsuccessful, it became clear that not only was further advance impossible, but if the attackers remained where they were, they would be extremely vulnerable during

daylight hours. With casualties of around 50 per cent, the attack was called off and the C Company withdrew.

Second strikes

After a second bombing raid on the monastery the following day, this time with fighter bombers, the First Sussex Regiment's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Glennie, was again instructed to attack Point 593 during the night. This second attack would use the complete battalion of 300 men. Lieutenant-Colonel Glennie insisted their supply of hand grenades was replenished, and put together a plan that had D Company and a single platoon from A Company attack on the left, and the rest of A Company on the right. B Company would reinforce D Company, and carry as much ammunition as possible to put them in a better position to repulse German counter-attacks. The remainder of C Company was kept in reserve.

Lieutenant-Colonel Glennie was annoyed that he had not been given more time to survey the battlefield and build up stocks of ammunition, but he went ahead with the attack anyway. He said, "we got on with it because a) it was repeatedly emphasised that we must do something to take the pressure off the Anzio beachhead which was in imminent danger of collapse, and b) we had so far always been successful. We had the superiority complex common to the rest of the 4th Indian Division."

“

At a distance of around 10 yards, the Germans opened up on the Royal Sussex with machine guns and grenades”



Attack in the Mountains



Night moves: US Army
gunners of the Allied
Fifth Army shelling
Monte Camino in a
night barrage

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

Delayed assault

The operation did not start well. Shelling Point 593 in support of the ground attack was impossible due to the proximity of the First Sussex, so Point 575 – a nearby high point which had been giving support fire to the defenders on Point 593 – was targeted instead. The shells were fired from positions around 1,500 feet below the assembled troops, and had to be fired over Snakeshead Ridge. A few shells fell among the assembling assault troops, causing casualties and forcing a hasty reorganisation.

The attack was further delayed as the mule train bringing the fresh supplies of grenades up Snakeshead Ridge was late, and when it arrived, it was found about half the allocation had been lost on the way. But at just gone midnight, the assault went ahead.

Once again, the advancing troops were peppered with machine gun fire and grenades. Going to ground, they tried to creep forwards, taking the ridge inch by inch. On the right, A Company was halted by a 45 foot precipice that wasn't marked on the map. Unable to get around it, for the rest of the attack they could do little more than give covering fire. D Company managed to get onto Point 593, where they fought the Germans hand to hand. Dislodging the Germans from their strong defensive positions proved impossible, but a few attackers managed to break through the enemy lines, where they immediately came up against a 40 foot drop. Inevitably, they were all wounded or captured.

As the night wore on, ammunition supplies again dwindled. The under-strength C Company advanced to reinforce A Company, but by then both A Company and D Company had lost all their officers to injuries. To make matters worse, three green flares fired by the Germans were mistaken for a withdrawal instruction by some men of D Company, causing confusion.

As Lieutenant Buckeridge recalls, "we tried all night, by various means. Sometimes we got onto Point 593 only for the Germans to open up with their machine guns in a counter-attack. By about two or three in the morning it was quite clear we just couldn't stay there. We hadn't done it, we couldn't do it, we just couldn't get on it."

“
We got on with it. It was repeatedly emphasised we must take the pressure off the Anzio beachhead”
Lieutenant-Colonel Glennie

BRITISH ARMY, ITALY, 1943/44

1: Fusilier, **6th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers,** **78th Infantry Division; Catenanuova,** **Sicily, July 1943**

Marching through this recently captured town, the 6th 'Skins' from 38th (Irish) Bde would soon be involved in heavy fighting against infantry and armour from the 'Hermann Goring' Division for the key hilltop position of Centuripe (to the Tommies, 'Cherry Ripe') on 31 July - 3 August. In the heat of the Sicilian summer a combination of KD bush shirts loose over woollen BD trousers is worn, the BD being harder-wearing than KD trousers. This private is armed with the .303in Lee Enfield No.4 rifle, although other members of his section had a mix of SMLEs and No.4s; for most soldiers serving in the Mediterranean the SMLE was to remain standard - the 2nd Army in NW Europe had priority for the No.4, although some examples had been in limited use in North Africa since 1942. He also carries triple bomb tubes for the platoon HQ's PIAT anti-tank weapon. The lightweight respirator haversack is worn over his left hip; this first appeared in quantity in 1943, although it was rarely seen carried that early.

2: Corporal stretcher-bearer **1st Battalion, London Scottish, 56th** **Division; Monte Camino, December 1943**

The winter fighting for Monte Camino was particularly harsh, against dogged enemy resistance. Supplies had to be transported by pack mule or by hand; the wounded were brought back down rocky mule tracks by stretcher-bearers struggling for a foothold in the mud and wet rock. The trip up the mountain to the Regimental Aid Post took three hours, the return to the Advanced Dressing Station another three. This SB of the 1st London Scottish from 168th Bde shows the strain of the weather and terrain, his rain-sodden BD and leather jerkin leaving him cold and adding to his exhaustion. Many troops on Camino wore

the anti-gas cape to protect them from the weather; the drawbacks were its fragility, and its tendency to trap moisture and heat during strenuous activity - this made its use by SBs as unpleasant as suffering the driving rain uncovered. This soldier wears corporal's chevrons on both upper arms, with the SB brassard on the left. Over his shoulder is slung the web shell dressing bag, and he holds the GS stretcher folded for the trek up the mountain. black cat on red, symbolising Dick Whittington's cat, was adopted by the 56th (London) Division (A). The division saw service in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia and Italy, fighting in both the Salerno and Anzio beachheads. Below is the regimental flash of the London Scottish - a dark blue thistle on a patch of the 'hodden grey' colour used for their kilts by this senior Territorial unit (B).

3: Corporal **1/6th Battalion, East Surrey Regiment,** **4th Infantry Division; Cassino, May 1944**

Uniformity of dress had by this time given way to a situation where each soldier wore what suited him best; most wore BD trousers but a variety of KD, British and US wool shirts as well as pullovers were used, the BD blouse being little in evidence during the heat of the day. This section leader has a US War Aid HBT bush shirt tucked into BD serge trousers, and 'musketry order' with entrenching tool; as was normal, he is armed with a Thompson. The 4th Division saw hard fighting against the German paratroopers of 1.Fallschirmjager-Division during the final battle for Cassino town, establishing bridgeheads across the Rapido River close under the looming Monastery Hill. Inset The shamrock sign of 38th (Irish) Bde was sometimes worn instead of, but normally below, the divisional sign; the extra red triangle identifies 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (C). Below is the first 'quadrant' pattern of the 4th Division sign, as worn in spring 1944 (D).



Illustration and caption © Osprey Publishing

Battle of Monte Cassino

After another brave but ultimately fruitless night, the remains of the battalion retreated to its original positions. Casualties were again high. The battalion was now down to 184 troops, out of 328 who started the attack. General Tucker's concerns about the dangers of attacking along the ridge were proving entirely justified.

By now, Lieutenant-General Freyberg's patience was wearing thin. He decided that a third assault, on the night of 17 February, would take place with a much greater number of troops. The 4th Battalion of the 6th Rajputana Rifles was to take over the attack on Point 593 along Snakeshead Ridge, with the now under-strength Royal Sussex Regiment held in reserve. The 1st Battalion of the 9th Gurkha Rifles would attack Points 444 and 450, a lower piece of high ground near Snakeshead Ridge. The 1st Battalion of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles was to launch a direct assault on the monastery, a difficult task in very hostile terrain, but Allied command believed the Gurkhas would prove ideally suited to fighting in this sort of mountainous territory. Again, little time was given to preparation and study of the terrain.

Gurkha sacrifices

The Gurkhas were soon pinned down on the bare mountainside, unable to make progress. They did in fact battle their way down the ravine and onto Monte Cassino, the mountain topped by what was left of the abbey, but they were beaten back.

As Major Gordon Shakespear of the 2nd Gurkhas recalled, "it was a complete ring of fire that came at us as we moved down to the start line. Apart from that, grenades and mines, anti-personnel mines. And tripwires. The whole area was festooned with them. There was no question of surprise. The Germans knew we were coming. Some just got through, but the majority of them were stopped, and casualties were so heavy it wasn't worth going on." The German engineers had done a terrific job of laying traps to catch unwary attackers. Historian Richard Holmes recounts one such incident. "As the Germans opened fire, one Gurkha company made for the only cover, a patch of scrub. It was booby-trapped, and the first men tripped a string of grenades. Half the leading platoon was blown up, and others were caught in withering machine gun fire."

As the night drew to a close, the survivors of the third attack retreated to their starting points, having made no territorial gains. The Rajputanas had lost 196 officers and men, the 9th Gurkhas 149, and the 2nd Gurkhas 96. General Alexander called off the ridge attack, arguing he didn't want another Passchendaele, a reference to the World War One battle of 1917 that degenerated into a muddy struggle of attrition costing appalling numbers of Allied lives.





Attack in the Mountains

“

A complete ring of fire
came at us [and] grenades
and mines, anti-personnel
mines. And tripwires”

Major Gordon Shakespear

Reinforcements arrive: The 6th Rajputana Rifles
took over from the Royal Sussex Regiment for
the third assault on Point 593, but were no more
successful; 196 of their men were lost

Getty Images

THE NEW ZEALANDERS ADVANCE

The 28th (Maori) Battalion is selected to spearhead the attack to take Cassino station

While the battle on Snakehead Ridge and Monte Cassino raged, the other half of General Alexander's and Lieutenant-General Freyberg's plans demanded that the New Zealanders cross the Rapido River, advance along the railway line and take over Cassino station. Engineers would bridge the Rapido at the crossing, allowing Combat Command B (CCB) of the 1st US Armoured Division to drive its tanks over the river, through the gap and into the Liri Valley, breaking the Gustav Line and threatening an advance to Rome.

It was not expected to be easy. The Germans had flooded the entrance to the Liri Valley by rerouting the Rapido, and heavy rainfall aggravated the problem to the extent that much of the valley had become impassable to both wheeled and tracked vehicles. The only way into the station was a raised area on the railway embankment. At 30 feet wide, and without the rails and sleepers, which had already been removed by the Germans, it was certainly big enough to carry tanks. But it had been heavily mined and partly destroyed. Extensive repairs were needed.

Major-General Kippenberger, in his first divisional command, decided that due to the narrow passages beyond the river and the limited accessible land in the valley entrance, he should attack with only one battalion. The plan called for the engineers to work at great speed. The bridges had to be built and the embankment had to be repaired that night, to allow the tanks to reach the infantry before daybreak. Should they fail to do so, the troops would be hopelessly exposed to German counter-attack.

The plan called for the engineers to work at great speed. The bridges had to be built and the embankment had to be repaired

Maori attack

The 28th (Maori) Battalion from the New Zealand Division was chosen to spearhead the attack, which was launched at 9:30pm on 17 February. A and B Companies led the advance, which made swift progress despite running into barbed wire, minefields and enemy machine guns. By midnight, they had reached the railway station, with B Company taking over the station buildings and engine sheds, and A Company clearing the yard and working hard on seizing the Hummock, a small hill south of the sheds.

The task was accomplished with great derring-do. As B Company's commander recalled, "as we closed, my 12 [Platoon] on the right wavered momentarily in the face of a particularly violent burst of [machine gun] fire from two Jerry posts. I immediately ordered a charge. The men leaped forward and, as in training, two men leapt on to the concertina wire and the others jumped over. There was sufficient light from flares and gun flashes. With bayonets and grenades, they cleaned the posts out. Others were busy with cutters on the ordinary dannert wire and the platoons were soon through on to the first objective."

The engineers made good progress on repairing the damage to the embankment, bulldozing obstacles and craters, and bridging irreparable gaps, but at around three in the morning, with one large breach still to be fixed, the moon came up and gave away their position. Previously unaware of what was going on in the station, the Germans were now able to accurately target machine gun fire from the still-uncaptured Hummock.

As dawn loomed, the engineers were ordered back to the safety of Allied lines. As there was no chance of armoured support

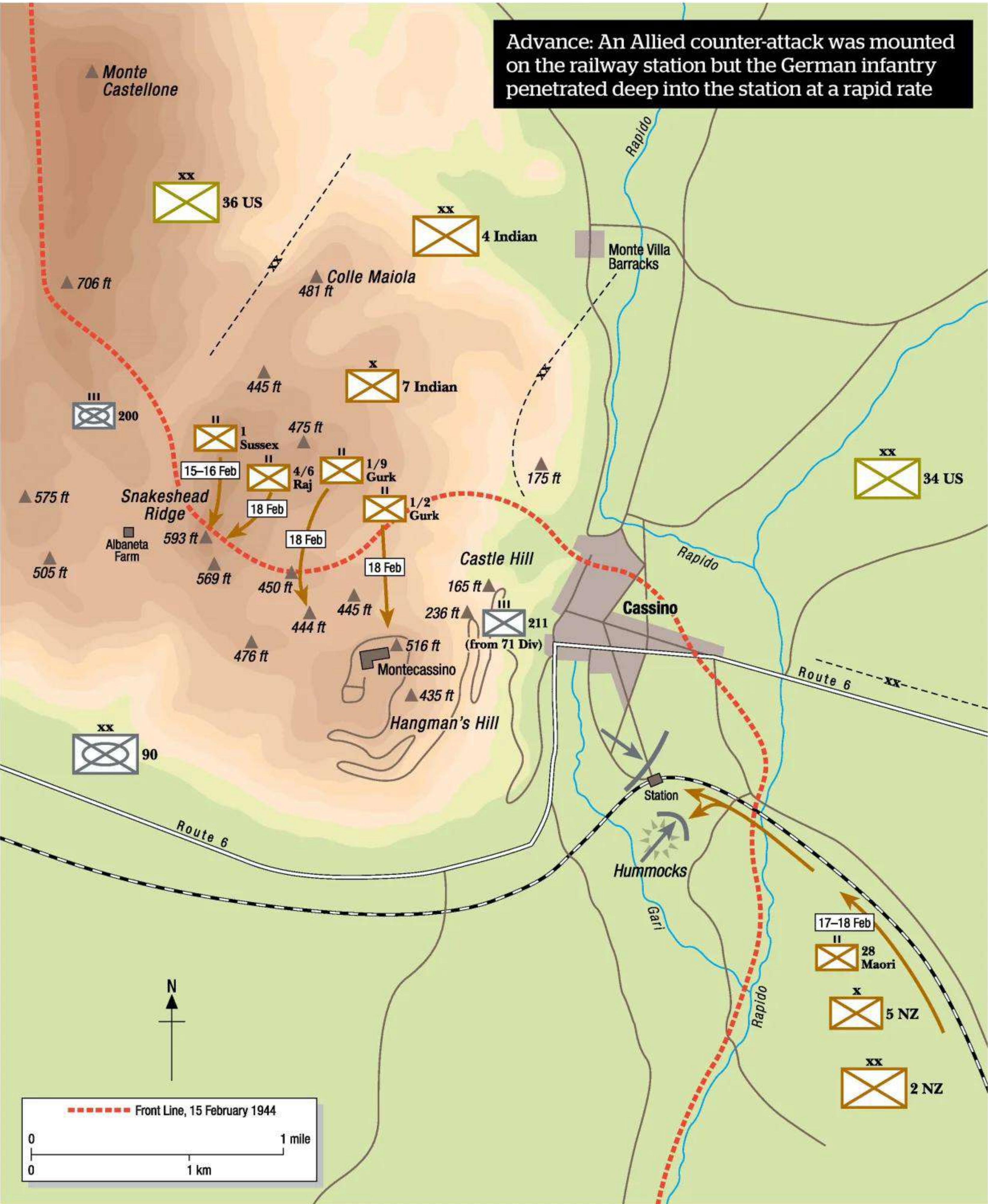




Waiting: New Zealand medics awaiting the wounded while watching bombs explode in the distance during the Allied push to take the town of Cassino

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino



arriving before daybreak, the two infantry companies asked if they could withdraw too, but were told to hold their position. Major-General Kippenberger figured “it was just possible that the enemy would not counter-attack with tanks”.

A constant artillery barrage laid down a smokescreen that shielded the Maoris from the German batteries on the nearby mountains, but by then the enemy had been able to assess their strengths and positions. Throughout the day, they made encroaching attacks from a small portion of the station they still held, inching forward using the Allies’ own smokescreen for cover. By late afternoon, the two companies had lost 76 men, either killed or wounded.

Walking a tightrope

At around 10am, C Company was sent as reinforcements, but to no avail. It proved impossible for the men to cross the narrow causeway, observed and under fire from the monastery and other high points. As one soldier put it, “it was like walking a tightrope in a shooting gallery.” Twelve men were lost

before they had moved 100 yards, and the company was driven back.

At around 3:15pm, a counter-attack was mounted on the station, and contrary to Kippenberger’s hopes, there were tanks at the head, specifically captured Shermans. German infantry attacked on two sides behind them. As they faced no Allied armour, and ammunition for the Maoris’ PIAT bazooka anti-tank weaponry was soon depleted, they were able to rapidly penetrate deep into the station. According to B Company intelligence officer Captain Matarehua ‘Monty’ Wikiriwhi, “I was telling my colonel over the radio, ‘We’ve had it,’ and he said, ‘stay there. Hold it! Hold it at all costs!’ I told him virtually to go and get stuffed, saying, ‘No, to hell with that’ and ordered my men out.” Another New Zealand Division officer recorded, “when the tank attack came in I was with the remnants of my company right in the station ... the forward section must have been overrun with them. They were not more than 50 yards from us and opened up with 75mm [shells] and machine guns. That was when I gave the order to withdraw.”

Inevitably, the withdrawal under fire was a difficult and costly task. Captain Wikiriwhi, already wounded, was hit in the leg by an explosive bullet. A junior officer applied a tourniquet and tried to drag him to safety, but was soon killed himself. Wikiriwhi lay still as the Germans advanced past him, and after nightfall managed to drag himself back to New Zealand lines.

The attack along the railway line had failed for precisely achieving no gains, but it had been close to doing so. The Germans were alarmed that the railway station had for a time been captured, and judging by a recorded conversation between Field Marshall Kesselring and Colonel General von Vieti nghoff, they hadn’t expected their counter-attack to succeed.

German counter-attack

While the two Allied attacks were in progress, the German 14th Army mounted a counter-attack at the Anzio beachhead. On 16 February, with two divisions of the 1st Parachute Corps on the left side of the Anzio-to-Albano road and several divisions from the LXXVI Panzer Corps on the right, they made several early gains as they pushed back the Allied perimeter. As Allied artillery and aircraft – freed up by the early bombing of the monastery – became involved, the front line gradually stabilised. But the Allied landing forces were still pushed back.

On the second day of the counter-attack, the Germans broke through the lines of the US 45th Division, sending 14 battalions of infantry supported by tanks hurtling towards the coast. General Lucas replied by plugging the gap with his reserves and calling another bomber strike. The commander of the 14th Army, Colonel General Eberhard von Mackensen, committed his reserves on the third day and renewed his attempts to smash the beachhead, but the Allied lines held.

That afternoon, General Lucas launched a counter-attack that pushed the Germans back around a mile, and after a few more minor attacks and counters, von Mackensen halted his offensive. The beachhead had held, but it was proving of little strategic value and the VI Corps dug in there were going nowhere.

Although General Lucas had proved a capable leader when on the defensive, it was not enough to save his job. On 22 February, he was replaced as commander of VI Corps at Anzio by Major General Lucian K Truscott. It was a move he saw coming. In his diary entry for 15 February, he had written, “I am afraid that the top side is not completely satisfied with my work. They are naturally disappointed that I failed to chase the Hun out of Italy, but there was no military reason why I should have been able to do so. In fact there is no military reason for Shingle.” After three weeks as deputy commander of the 5th Army, he returned to the United States.



Kiwi commander: Lt. General Freyberg, commander of New Zealand Army troops fighting alongside British forces during the Allied drive through Italy

Getty Images; map: © Osprey Publishing



OPERATION FISCHFANG, 16 FEBRUARY 1944

When Mackensen asked Hitler for another two divisions to attack the Anzio beachhead, he was instead promised several new secret weapons including remote control demolition vehicles and a battalion of the new Panther tank.

The substitution of new wonder weapons for combat-experienced troops was

symptomatic of the problems facing the Wehrmacht in 1944 and a foretaste of the continued decline in the Wehrmacht order of battle through 1944. The scene here depicts a column of infantry marching past an armoured column to the rear of the battle-line during Operation Fischfang. The armoured column is headed by one of the Borgward B-IV remote control demolition

vehicles (1) of 3./s.Panzer Abteilung 504, followed by a column of Panther Ausf. A tanks (2) of Panzer Regiment 4. The B-IV demolition vehicle was a small, tank-like vehicle that had a small compartment for the operator in the front. Generally, the B-IV was driven close to the target area by the driver, but once within enemy small-arms range the driver would exit the vehicle



Osprey Publishing

and switch it to radio control. The B-IV was remotely controlled from a tank or armoured vehicle, in this case by a specially-equipped Tiger I tank.

The B-IV was driven towards a vital target by remote control, and on reaching its destination, a wedged-shaped high-explosive container with 450 kg of high explosives on the nose of the vehicle would be jettisoned against the target. Once the B-IV had been withdrawn to a safe-distance, the charge was remotely detonated. While a good idea on paper, the B-IV was awkward to use in combat conditions, particularly during Operation Fischfang when the muddy conditions

caused the vehicle to become easily bogged down.

In addition, there were few high-value targets when facing infantry in simple trenches. The Panther tank was proved to be a disappointment at Anzio. The early production run had mechanical reliability problems, which were also compounded by the muddy conditions in February 1944. As a result, the new Panther battalion deployed at Anzio was restricted by the corps commander in the conduct of its operations. The high command did not wish to lose one of the new tanks to the Allies, so the battalion commander was instructed to keep his tanks back from the forward edge

of battle and engage in long range fire only.

These Panther tanks display a local innovation at Anzio, a type of simple anti-mud device consisting of small tree branches lashed together with wire or rope to create a length of matting. (3) If the tank became bogged down in the mud, the matting could be placed under one or both tracks to provide additional traction and help it move. The limitations of the new weapons at Anzio meant that the 'landers' – the common German infantrymen – bore the brunt of the fighting. Given the Allied superiority in artillery, the muddy fields, and the Allied trench-lines, it was a grim and costly business.

THE THIRD BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

15-26 March 1944

After the failure of the previous two assaults on Monte Cassino, some new thinking was required. Forging the Rapido while it was bloated

by heavy rainfall had proved to be a costly mistake, as had the attack in the mountains.

There seemed little point in using fresh troops to repeat strategies that

had already failed to make the required breakthrough, but what modifications could possibly be made to improve their chances of success? Major General John K. Cannon thought he had the answer...

Planning the two-pronged attack 96

The battle begins 98

The FG42 in action 102

Reorganisation and assessment 110



Long march: Lines of German prisoners, captured in the Cassino area, marching to prisoners of war camps behind the advanced 5th Allied Army lines

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

Combat in Cassino:
Commonwealth forces
endured fierce fighting
in the third advance
on Monte Cassino,
which was codenamed
Operation Dickens



PLANNING THE TWO PRONGED ATTACK

An intense aerial bombardment was central to the plans for the next Allied attack on Monte Cassino

Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, Major General Cannon was the commander of the newly organised Mediterranean Allied Air Forces. He believed an intense aerial bombardment from the combined Allied air forces' heavy bombers would obliterate Cassino, destroy the enemy defensive positions and give the Allies the edge when pressing north over the river.

This, he told General Alexander, would see the town "whipped out like an old tooth". The aerial bombardment would be followed by two attacks on the town and surrounding area from the north. One would be directed at the fortifications within Cassino, and the other was to target the mountain and the now-ruined monastery. These twin attacks would, crucially, be supported by tanks. Instead of attacking Monte Cassino from Snakeshead Ridge, the 4th Indian Division was to strike from the high ground at Castle Hill and surrounding peaks just north of the town. Engineers were building a road – Cavendish Road – which would carry a mixture of American and New Zealand tanks behind Point 593 on Snakeshead Ridge, to support the ground troops as they attacked the monastery and surrounding defensive positions.

Preparations

While not totally convinced, General Alexander was prepared to give Cannon's plan a try. It was certainly preferable to the heavy casualties sustained during the last two battles. In a report, he said, "after discussing the plan with General Clark and General Freyberg, I decided we would next attempt to capture the town of Cassino, after a heavy bombardment, with the New Zealand Division, which would then push past the southern face of Monte Cassino, along Route 6, make contact

with the Indians north-west of the monastery and thus encircle the enemy positions. This would give us a big bridgehead over the Rapido and an entry into the Liri Valley."

Preparing for the attack, transport units ferried troops, fuel, ammunition and rations to camouflaged dumps just behind the front line. The build-up was so vast that a single platoon of the 4th New Zealand Reserve Mechanical Transportation Company recorded that they moved "113,000 25-pounder shells (enough to give each gun about 1,570 rounds), 5,000 smoke generators and over a thousand leaflet shells."

The long wait

The plan for the new attack on Monte Cassino required at least three consecutive days of good weather with clear skies. Instead, conditions worsened and by 21 February, it was raining almost continuously. The attack, codenamed Operation Dickens, was postponed due to the weather on 21 successive days. Meanwhile, the conditions for the waiting troops were poor. The New Zealanders were stuck in a valley in freezing, soaking weather. The Indian troops and the Royal Sussex Regiment were also on an equally cold hillside, and found themselves under sporadic fire from snipers and mortar bombs.

But at least the delays gave time for more planning and intelligence gathering. As New Zealand tank commander Jim Furness explained, "the start of the attack was held up waiting for favourable weather for the opening aerial bombardment. We put the waiting time to good effect, by studying the layout of the streets and buildings, from maps, aerial photographs and ground recces. As I was to lead the tank attack I had to form a clear picture in my mind as to the route we would take, of buildings we would utilise

and so on. Then the big day arrived, but not before the Italian kids had been asking, 'When is Dickens Day, kiwi?'"

The New Zealand forces suffered a major setback on 2 March when Major-General Kippenberger was badly wounded after standing on a Schu-mine, a pressure-sensitive anti-personnel device packed with 200 grams of TNT, on a supposedly-cleared path on Monte Trocchio.

Best man

Kippenberger recorded the event in his diary. "Corps conference at 14:00 hours. Went with [Captain] Frank Massey up Monte Trocchio afterwards and, coming down, stepped on a mine and had one foot blown off, the other mangled and thumb ripped up. Frank slightly hurt." He was evacuated to a medical centre, where his remaining foot and the lower portions of both legs were amputated. The 2nd Division had lost a very capable commander. He was replaced by Major General Graham 'Ike' Parkinson, former commander of the 6th New Zealand Brigade, but as one of his troops commented on Kippenberger's departure, "there goes our best man. He is irreplaceable". Morale was greatly affected.

“

We put the waiting time to good effect, studying the layout of the streets and the buildings..."

Lieutenant Jim Furness

THE BATTLE BEGINS

When it finally came, the aerial bombardment was swift and decisive, but resistance prevailed

After three weeks of delays, on 15 March – the Ides of March, an ancient Roman feast day for the war god Mars – the coded command ‘Bradman to bat’ was issued. It meant the attack was on. At 8:30am precisely, the first wave of bombers took to the skies and dropped their deadly cargo on the town of Cassino.

As it says in NC Phillips’ Official New Zealand History of the Second World War, “as they swept across the blue sky towards the target, the medium bombers of the first wave were watched intently by the Allied soldiers who had climbed to vantage points and settled down with binoculars to absorb a sight that they expected to remember for the rest of their lives. In the comparative safety of the hills around Cervaro, the picnic atmosphere was indecent but irrepressible. Here, after many days, was the spectacular promise of release from boredom and deadlock. In the next few hours, a whole town would shudder to destruction before one’s eyes.”

In all, ten groups of heavy bombers and six of medium bombers – around 500 aircraft in all – spent roughly three and a half hours dropping almost 1,000 tons of 1,000lb bombs with delayed-action fuses on the town. The bombers were protected by around 280 RAF Spitfires and USAF P-38 Lightnings, flying high above the bomber formations. Another 260 aircraft were kept on the ground by cloud cover, but this was still the largest air force ever assembled in the Mediterranean theatre. The main target area was around 400 by 1,400 yards, and although the first wave of bombers achieved an impressive accuracy, the smoke and dust thrown up by their bombs made it difficult for those behind it to take aim. Perhaps it’s unsurprising that only around 50% of the bombs actually fell within the town boundaries (around a mile or less from its centre) and only 8% actually hit the town itself.

Inevitably, a few misdirected bombs landed among the Allied troops waiting to follow up the bombing with an attack. American, British and New Zealand

bombardiers took 44 casualties, while around 50 troops and 100 mules were wounded or killed in the 4th Indian Division area. The town of Venafro, around 18 miles from the target, was bombed by mistake. A Moroccan military hospital was hit and there were 140 civilian casualties.

The allies advance

When the bombing ended at around noon, the artillery opened up, with 746 guns firing a creeping barrage that advanced 100 yards every six minutes. Behind it, the New Zealand 25th Battalion advanced down the Caruso Road from their starting point of about a mile north of the town’s perimeter. B Company moved on the right of the road, while A Company kept to the river that ran alongside it. To the left of the road, the B Squadron of the 19th New Zealand Armoured Regiment drove its tanks, which were to take the lead on the advance into the town. Tank commander Jim Furness remembers it well. “When we reached the starting point near the old convent, the sight that met our eyes was devastating. Not a single street or building existed, only a vast area of crumbled masonry. The four-hour aerial bombardment had greatly changed the face of the landscape. The whole panorama was one of devastation and destruction.”

Between the bombing and the artillery barrage, around half of the 300 German paratroopers defending Cassino were killed. Even so, as the 25th advanced into the town, they came under attack from machine gun

“

Not a single street or building existed. The whole panorama was one of devastation and destruction”

Lieutenant Jim Furness





Look to the skies: General Leese, commanding the British Eighth Army, with his corps commanders watching an Allied bombing raid on Cassino, 15 March 1944

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

The Germans rallied quicker than expected, and were soon manning what remained of their defences

The Battle Begins

fire, from both the ruins of the town and the lower slopes of the nearby Castle Hill. The reinforced cellars and portable steel pillboxes installed in Cassino had proved their worth.

The Germans rallied quicker than expected, and were soon manning what remained of their defences. The bombing made life difficult for the tanks of the 19th Armoured too, with craters and fallen buildings making their planned route into the town impassable.

They eventually arrived 30 minutes after the infantry they were supposed to support. As Lieutenant Jim Furness explained, "I couldn't find a route that led to the railway station. I left my tank and

scrambled on hands and knees in search of a thoroughfare. Our job was to lead the infantry, but no co-ordinated attack could be developed. We found our way through and over rubble to the station, dealing with targets along the way, but we certainly didn't help the infantry in the way envisaged in the plan of attack."

Progress was slow. The attackers took an hour to advance each 100 yards, instead of the ten minutes that was allowed for in the plans. B Company, which had been tasked with clearing the houses at the foot of Castle Hill and securing a hotel on high ground near Route 6, were pinned down by heavy fire and achieved neither objective.

Continues on p104

Deadly cargo: Headed for Cassino with a bomb load, B-25 Mitchells on the way to attack the area, 18 March, 1944

Getty Images

THE FG 42 IN ACTION

In the shadow of a shattered church, two Fallschirmjäger engage Allied troops with their FG 42s. The soldier on the right, seen here changing the 20-round magazine of his weapon, has an FG 42/I, with the bipod legs folded up beneath the barrel. Like his comrade, he is using the eight-pouch FG 42 ammunition bandolier, each pouch taking one magazine. Note the perforated muzzle brake of the first model of the FG 42. The soldier on the left

has one of the newer FG 42/II models, identifiable by the muzzle-mounted bipod (as opposed to mounted just in front of the gas piston), a less steeply-angled pistol grip and a ribbed muzzle brake. He is delivering fire in 4–5-round bursts, each burst separated by a couple of seconds' pause. This mode of fire provided decent volumes of suppression, while also reducing the risks of the gun overheating and rounds 'cooking off'.





Battle of Monte Cassino



Under attack: British soldiers fight their way through the rubble. Despite the Allied bombing, some defences held and advancing troops came under attack from German machine gun fire

The Battle Begins

Continued from page 101

A Company managed to take the old post office, but Lieutenant-General Freyberg had trouble sending in reinforcements as their routes into the town were extremely restricted. To make matters worse, that evening the rain started again, contrary to the weather forecasts, flooding bomb craters and muddying the battlefield. It also made communications impossible, as the troops' radios suffered water damage. As night fell, the clouds blotted out the moonlight, making the task of clearing out the town's remaining defenders even more difficult. But by then, half of Cassino was in Allied hands.

The 25th's D Company proved more successful. Its mission was to take Castle Hill, a piece of high ground close to the town. Finding their entry to the hill from the town blocked, a single platoon climbed an almost sheer cliff directly below, capturing two lookouts who were sheltering from the weather. At the top, this platoon captured a pillbox that was being used as a company headquarters, taking 20 prisoners. They came under fire from Germans in the castle, but by then two further D Company platoons had managed to fight their way up a ravine. The castle was surrounded and its defenders flushed out. By 5pm, Castle Hill was in New Zealand hands.

Fierce defence

The men of D Company then waited for the 4th Battalion of the Royal Essex Regiment to arrive, but due to a fault in communications they didn't receive the signal to move until two hours after the castle had been captured. Major Frank Ketteley's A Company set off first, but the turn in the weather made progress extremely difficult. As Sergeant Bill Hawkins recalls, "we were on our way up Castle Hill. It was strewn with boulders and thickets. In the dark, it was raining, fire was terrific and sniper fire was continuous. It was a difficult climb, but we were all pleased that when we got up there we were inside the castle." Major Dennis Beckett's C Company followed, with the New Zealanders eventually relieved at midnight.

Over the next two days, the Gurkhas took Hangman's Hill, another piece of high ground near the town, and the New Zealand tanks and infantry had broken through in Cassino, capturing the railway station south of the town. But the town as a whole was still not in Allied hands. Crack German paratroopers were mounting a fierce defence, reinforcements were still reaching their positions and snipers were creeping back into areas of the town that had been previously cleared.

Continues on p108

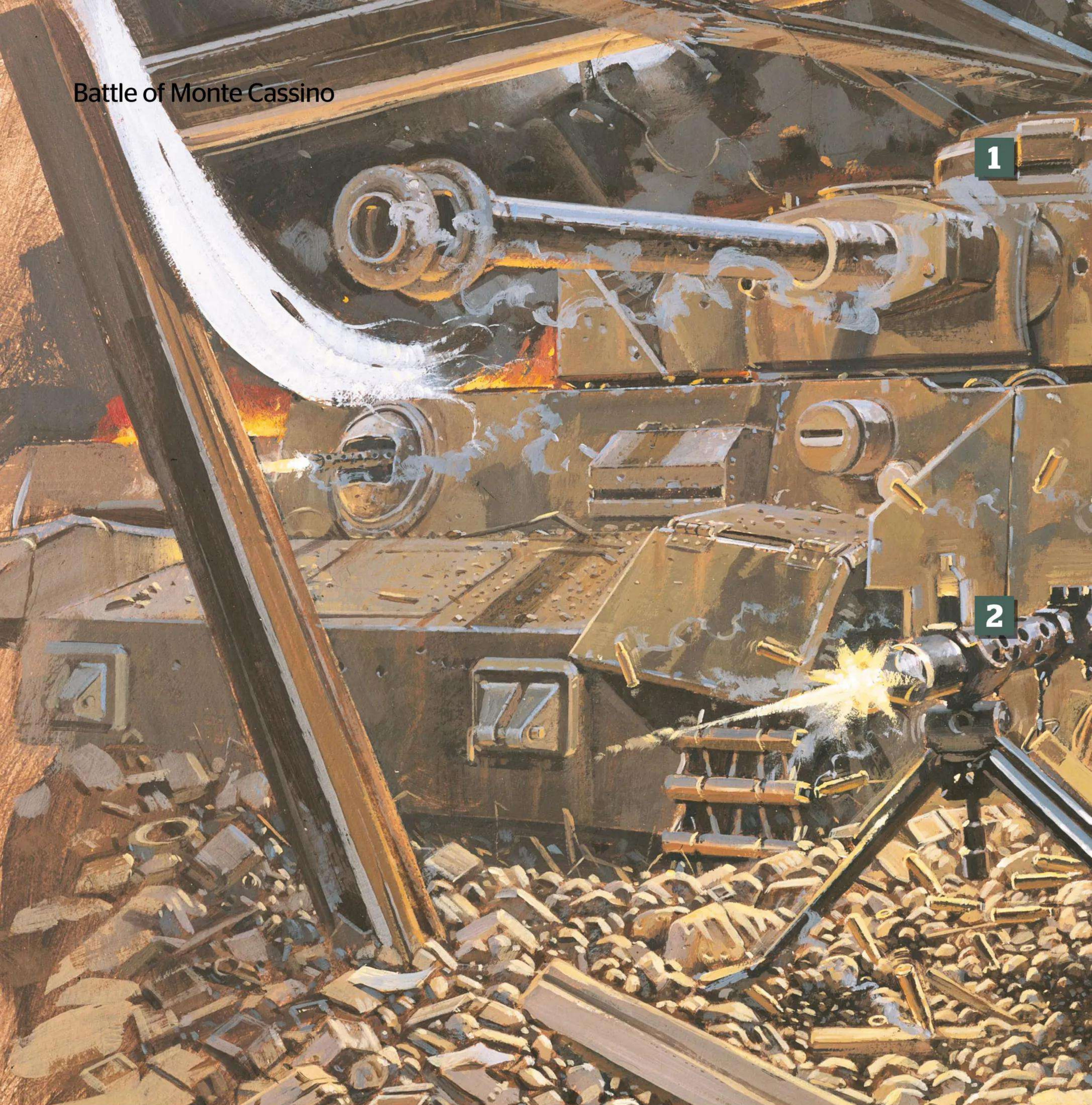


“

We were on our way up Castle Hill. In the dark, it was raining, fire was terrific and sniper fire was continuous. It was a difficult climb”

Sergeant Bill Hawkins

Getty Images



GERMAN PARATROOPERS DEFENDING CASSINO

Holding off the Allied attack on the town from the ruins of the Continental Hotel

Oberst Heilmann's German 3rd Parachute Regiment was deployed in Cassino and around Monastery Hill at the start of the third Battle of Cassino. The regiment's II Parachute Battalion, commanded by Major Foltin, supported by 10th Company of the III Parachute Battalion held the town itself.

On 15 March 1944, the battle opened with the heavy bombing raid by 600 Allied aircraft, followed by several hours firing by over 750 guns. Cassino was reduced to rubble. Over 220 German paratroopers were buried under its collapsed buildings. Those that survived staggered from the



debris and set about reinforcing and fortifying the ruins to make each derelict building a strongpoint. They then fought tenaciously to hold every square metre.

One of the strongest positions was based around the remains of the Continental Hotel, situated on an important road junction where Route 6 winds around the base of Montecassino. A Panzer IV tank was backed into the hotel's reception area and machine guns and mortars emplaced to cover every approach. General Heidrich's paratroopers held on to this position throughout the third battle of Cassino and well into the fourth, only giving up

the building over two months later when several Allied divisions had got behind them into the Liri Valley and the Polish II Corps was above them on Monastery Hill. The scene shows the PzKpfw IV (1) in the ruins of the Continental Hotel sited to fire down Route 6.

The New Zealanders found great difficulty attacking through the town and trying to manoeuvre their Shermans through the rubble strewn streets. They lost every tank that attempted to close on the hotel. The German corps commander, General Von Senger und Etterlin, attributes the parachute division's ability to hold the

hotel and the western sector of the town to this one tank. Each infantry attack against the position was pinned down by concentrated machine-gun and mortar fire. The paratroopers are manning a MG34 light machine-gun (2), with an NCO (3) acquiring targets through his binoculars. All are wearing the second pattern camouflaged jump smock with a silver Luftwaffe eagle on the right breast (4). The Luftwaffe eagle is also prominent on each of their standard Fallschirmjäger helmets (5). The NCO (sergeant) displays his badge of rank as a patch on his collar in the form of two silver wings on a yellow background (6).

Battle of Monte Cassino

Continued from page 105

A counter-attack was mounted on Castle Hill by more German paratroopers. As Sergeant Hawkins remembers, “they had the grenades with the long handles, and they could throw them quite some distance, but they were throwing them up, to drop in the castle. If you wanted to shoot at them, you had to put your head up and look over the top of the wall and look down. That was when you put yourself in a position of someone shooting you. It was a difficult place to defend.”

But their attack was beaten off, and a truce called so both sides could collect their dead and wounded. “The stretcher bearers from both sides, German and our own, went out and collected in the wounded from outside the castle walls,” says Hawkins. “We had 14 or 15 German prisoners in the castle, and some of them volunteered to go out with our stretcher bearers and bring in the wounded.”

Continued resistance

On 19 March, almost 40 tanks advanced on the monastery from the rear. The attack was

supposed to be in support of an infantry advance from Hangman’s Hill, but although German counter-attacks made this advance impossible, the tank commanders hadn’t been told and went ahead as planned. For weeks, Indian engineers had been turning a simple goat path into a road capable of carrying armour, working behind camouflage screens to conceal their activities.

German paratrooper Robert Frettlöhr faced the oncoming tanks. “A tank is a very scary thing,” he said. “They seem to be



Aftermath: The Red Cross of Mercy flies over the vehicles of an Allied Medical Unit moving into the ruins of Cassino after the vast Allied air attack of 15 March

The Battle Begins

louder at night-time than they are during the day. [The German paras] had special equipment such as anti-tank mines which were like a dinner plate, upside down. If the tank rolls over it, it tips the plate and the 70lbs of dynamite under there blows the tracks off."

The paratroopers were taken off guard, but soon sprang into action using their mines to halt the advance. The lead tank was quickly blown up. "It blocked the road, because it was only a narrow track," Frettlöhr continues. "They all got stuck behind one another. They

tried to get around it, and eventually tried to get out, and they were picked off as they tried to escape downhill again."

It was to be the last significant attack of the third Battle of Monte Cassino. The German 1st Parachute Division was battered but unbowed, and the Allies had little to show for their efforts. An angry telegram from Churchill demanded to know why General Alexander kept throwing men at the monastery. The Commander in Chief of the Allied Armies in Italy knew a fourth failed attack would not be tolerated.

“

**A tank is a very scary thing.
They seem to be louder at
night-time than in the day”**

*German paratrooper
Robert Frettlöhr*



REORGANISATION AND ASSESSMENT

In many ways the Allies had enjoyed superiority in the third battle, but it was a German victory

For three days following the end of the third battle, the Allies reorganised their forces and stabilised the front line. The Gurkhas withdrew from Hangman's Hill, as their position was too isolated to be tenable. New Zealand troops were withdrawn from Point 202 for similar reasons.

The newly-arrived British 78th Division relieved the exhausted 4th Indian Division in the mountains, and in the town the British 1st Guards Brigade took over from the 2nd New Zealand Division, which was similarly exhausted. On 26 March, the New Zealand Corps headquarters was dissolved and command passed to the British XIII Corps.

Casualties had been heavy on both side of the battle. The 4th Indian Division, for example, had suffered 3,000 men killed, missing or wounded, while the 2nd New Zealand Division lost 1,600. On the German side, their front-line divisions had been mauled; according to the German XIV Corps War Diary for 23 March, battalions at the front line had between 40 and 120 troops left, way below full strength.

Yet the Third Battle of Monte Cassino has to be seen as another German victory. Although the Allies enjoyed a huge superiority in armour, artillery and planes, the unforgiving terrain made it difficult to exploit these advantages. Also, this superiority was not

matched in the infantry that bore the brunt of the fighting. Tactical mistakes were also identified. Major General Tucker, Commander of the 4th Indian Division, complained about the "extraordinary obsession in British commanders' minds that they must challenge the enemy strength rather than play on his weakness. The waste of hammering at the enemy's strongest point is seen at its most extreme form at the Battle of Cassino, where men were hurled time and again against a mountain position which had for centuries defied attack from the south and which in 1944 was not only the strongest position in Italy, but was held by the pick of the German troops in that theatre of war."



Tactical mistakes

As General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin later wrote, “often it looked like the enemy, having penetrated into so many strongholds in the defence system, might well turn the tide against the defenders. But the two tactical handicaps for the attacking side remained the same all throughout the battle; infantry could not follow the bombing instantaneously – it had to be withdrawn for the bombing two or three miles back. Secondly, tanks could not follow nor bypass the infantry. Their movements were slowed down by the huge craters leading into Cassino and on to the few bridges. The craters were not only those of bombs, but also those of the shelling which had gone on for months.”

Senger continued, “it was – as Hitler said to me – the only battlefield that resembled those of World War One. And indeed, wandering along the path across the battlefield to reach a battalion command post reminded me of the Somme in 1916, the same surface all covered by clods or ploughed by shelling, no wall, no tree unhurt, no human being to be seen, but hell ablaze with the crack of explosions and the particular smell in the air of hot iron and newly turned soil.” This is undeniably an astute and accurate summary of the Third Battle of Monte Cassino and the tactical mistakes made.

No-Man's-Land: The Liri Valley as viewed on 4 March 1944



THE FOURTH BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

11-18 May 1944

With the Anzio beachhead no longer considered vulnerable, and High Command too preoccupied with the impending D-Day landings to pressurise General Alexander for a breakthrough in Italy, the Allied multi-national forces did not

launch another attack at Monte Cassino until the spring.

With the snow melted and the rain abating, the better weather meant tanks could once again be driven on low ground, previously too muddy to be passable. The lull in the fighting also gave the Allies time to prepare, think

out a more appropriate strategy and bolster their forces for the next attack. The few gains made in the earlier three battles were consolidated, and troop positions facing the monastery were enlarged and reinforced. Clear skies meant that air cover could be fully utilised too.





Operation Diadem is planned **114**

The first strike **116**

The Poles take the monastery **120**

The line is crossed **124**

After the battle: Three German prisoners walking along the devastated Highway 6, the route to Rome from Cassino, 18 May 1944

Getty Images



OPERATION DIADEM IS PLANNED

For the fourth attack on Cassino, the Allies radically broadened their strategy and vision

For the fourth major offensive, General Alexander developed a new strategy. His overall intention was to “force the enemy to commit the maximum number of divisions in Italy at the time the cross-channel invasion is launched”. Operation Diadem would be an attempt at smashing the Gustav Line once and for all.

As the better weather meant larger infantry formations could be deployed, the bulk of the British 8th army was moved from the eastern side of Italy, over the mountains running the length of the country, to join the American 5th Army in the west. This new strength in numbers would be used to attack a 20-mile front between the town of Cassino and the west coast of Italy.

On the left flank, the US II Corps would attack up the coast, taking Route 7 towards Rome. Actually reaching the city was not a priority. General Alexander was more concerned about breaking the western sector of the Gustav Line, rather than capturing the Italian capital. Unfortunately, this is another area where he clashed with his subordinate, Lieutenant-General Mark W. Clark, who considered taking Rome to be of prime importance.

To their right, the French Corps would attack across the Garigliano, using the

bridgehead created by X Corps back in January. They would then move into the Aurunci Mountains to support the advance into the Liri Valley. On the right flank, the 8th Army, under Lieutenant-General Oliver Leese, would commit its XIII Corps to attack along the Liri Valley. Leese had replaced Field Marshal Montgomery, who had returned to Britain to command the Allied ground forces used in the D-Day landings.

Furthest east, the 3rd and 5th Divisions of the Polish II Corps, under Lieutenant-General Wladyslaw Anders, would strike at the destroyed abbey at Monte Cassino, then push behind it to link with the XIII Corps in the Liri Valley. Most of the Polish II Corps troops were survivors of the Siberian exile during the Soviet occupation of 1939, and had relieved the 78th Division in the mountains behind Cassino. Perhaps it could succeed where the much smaller 4th Indian Division had not. The Canadian I Corps were kept in reserve.

These plans were made over the two months after the end of the third battle, giving the Allies time for intelligence

gathering and training. The troops were moved into position gradually to not arouse the Germans’ suspicions. Most movements took place at night, and when tanks were moved from the Adriatic front, dummy vehicles made from wooden frames and painted canvas were left behind so German reconnaissance planes would report that they were still there. Fake road

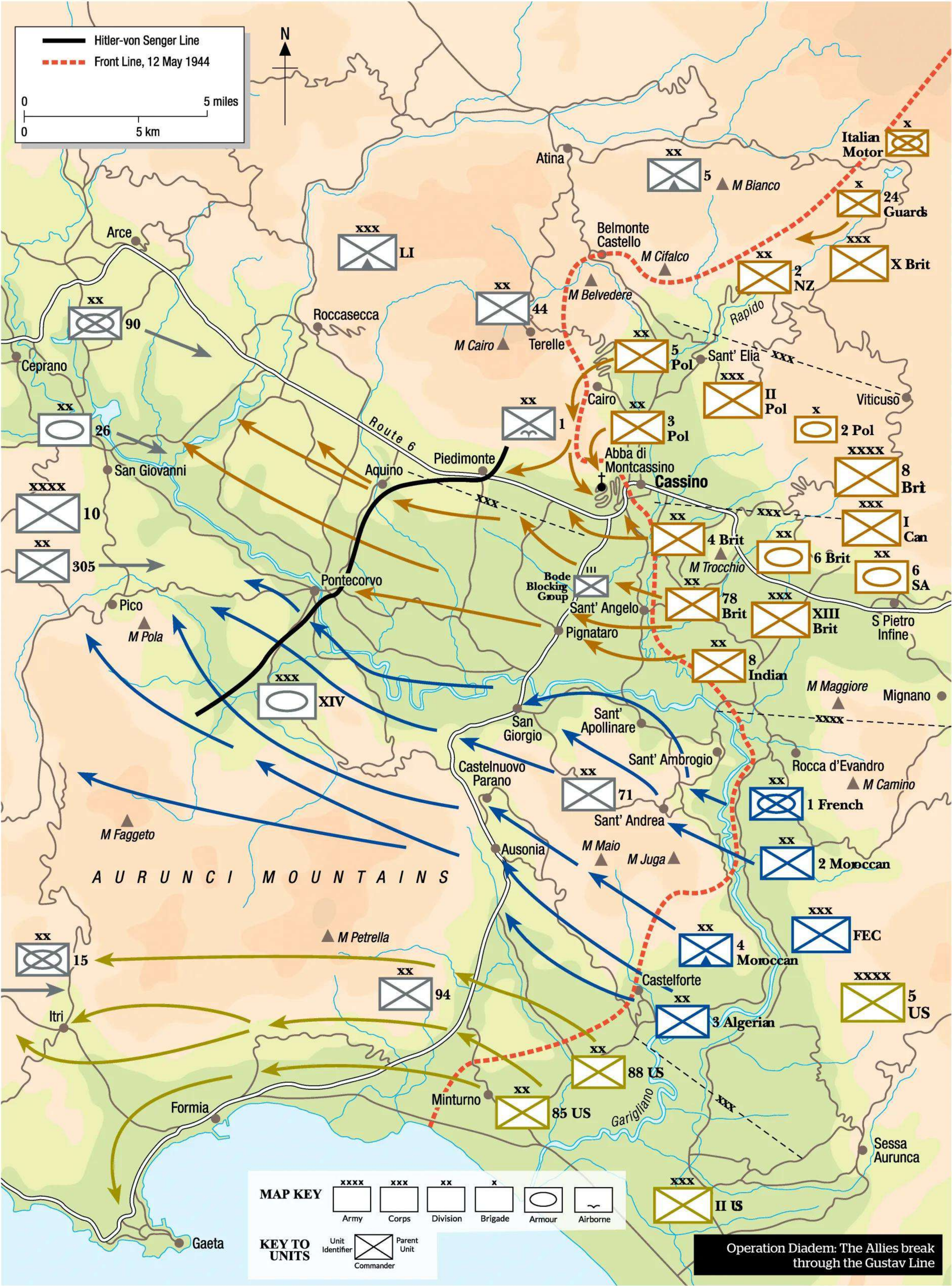
signs and radio signals gave the impression that plans for a second beach landing were afoot, specifically a landing north of Rome.

The deception was successful, Field Marshall Kesselring kept two full divisions in the area to counter this non-existent attack, keeping them from reinforcing the Gustav Line during the battle’s early stages.

The successful Allied deceptions

meant that when the fourth Battle of Monte Cassino was underway, Kesselring believed there were just six Allied divisions facing the western section of the Gustav Line, against his own four divisions. There were thirteen. The three-to-one superiority needed for an infantry attack on strong defensive positions had been achieved.

Operation Diadem was conceived as an attempt at smashing the Gustav Line once and for all



THE FIRST STRIKE

Despite tremendous hardships, the next attack would yield some significant Allied gains

On 11 May, the first attack started at 11pm with a massive artillery barrage targeting every known German headquarters, defensive position and gun battery along the 20-mile front. On the 8th Army front, 1,060 guns opened up, with 600 guns on the 5th Army section. Operation Diadem was under way.

As the bombardment ended in the early hours of 12 May, attacks were quickly launched across all four sectors of Allied-held territory, as General Alexander's strategy of launching a mass offensive, instead of piecemeal strikes used previously, was being put into effect.

While most Allied commanders approved of his plans, Lieutenant-General Mark W. Clark was upset that his 5th Army had been moved to the coastal sector, instead of facing Monte Cassino. Rightly or wrongly, Clark saw this as a snub, as his troops would no longer be the ones to capture the monastery.

The attack caught the Germans unawares. Even though a spring offensive was the next logical move for the Allies, several of the enemy's key officers were away when it began. General von Vietinghoff was in Germany receiving a medal from Hitler. Kesselring's chief of staff, General Westphal, was on leave, as were XIV Panzer Corps commander General von Senger and Senger's own chief of staff. It seemed the Allies

had chosen the date of their new attack extremely well.

Where the Rapido River flowed past Monte Cassino, 18 bridges were built. To mask their construction, and later their use, hundreds of portable smoke generators were lit, cloaking the river and the Allied engineers in smoke and shielding them from German observers. As German paratrooper Robert Frettlöhr, stationed near the Abbey ruins, put it, "the whole valley was covered in smoke so the Allies could bring their [fresh troops] to the front line. It was terrible stuff that used to make you sick when you had to breathe it in."

Fighting was fierce, but the British 4th Infantry Division and the 8th Indian Division managed to get across. When the bridges were built, the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade took their tanks over the river, providing vital support for the infantry when faced with the German counter-attacks. After several failed attempts in the earlier battles, a substantial bridgehead across the Rapido had been won.

After several failed attempts in the earlier battles, a substantial bridgehead across the Rapido had been won

French success

The French Expeditionary Corps (Corps Expéditionnaire Français, or CEF), to the immediate right of the Americans, by now consisted of 105,000 troops, the equivalent of almost five divisions. Ahead of the battle, on 11 May, their commander, General Alphonse Juin, called them to arms. "French soldiers



Mondadori via Getty Images



Vital battle: A French Army officer gives orders to his soldiers working in the Cassino sector, March 1944.

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

of the Army of Italy, a vital battle which will hasten victory and the liberation of our country begins today. The struggle will be all-inclusive, implacable and fought to the bitter end. Called to honour our colours, we will conquer as we have already conquered, thinking of martyred France who waits and watches us. Forward.”

The CEF was perfectly suited to the harsh mountainous terrain and hand-to-hand fighting that it faced. Although it was lacking in motorised transport, its ten companies of mules – each with over 300 mules and 230 troops, most of whom were Tunisian – were ideal for carrying equipment and wounded men along paths where lorries, ambulances and jeeps simply couldn’t go. Striking between the Liri river and the Tyrrhenian Sea, they were successful beyond the hopes of Allied command. Exploiting every success, they pressed forward and overwhelmed the German positions, inflicting heavy casualties and taking many prisoners.

In the first three days of the battle, they had managed to break through the German defensive lines and outflank their forces in the Liri Valley. The Monte Fauto heights were captured, giving the Allied artillery key observation posts, and a French Alsatian deserter from the German army provided vital information about enemy defensive positions and minefields.

That’s not to say the French colonial forces had it easy. Their armoured advance on the west bank of the Garigliano proved to be problematic, as a result of communication problems and minefields. As 21-year-old ambulance driver Solange Cullivier recorded at the time, “the advanced surgical units are overwhelmed. We spend the whole night going back and forth on the long, snaking tracks whose 30-degree incline dizzies us. We are living in another dimension which allows us to resist sleep, hunger, thirst. Only coffee keeps us going, 30 a day when we’re under attack.”

Significant gains

But despite these tremendous hardships, significant gains were being made. On 13 May, the German right wing faltered before the 5th Army’s advance. In the Liri Valley, Field Marshall Kesselring desperately reinforced his positions against the Eighth Army, which was by now assisted by the French forces on the newly captured Monte Maio. Realising the Gustav Line was in danger of collapse, Kesselring bought himself as much time as possible to retreat to his fall-back defensive position, the Hitler Line, some eight miles further north.

On 14 May, Moroccan Gourmiers helped support the XIII Corps in the Liri Valley by progressing through the mountains parallel to the pass, an area that was undefended as the Germans felt it was an impassable route. But perhaps the greatest gains were made by the Polish...



THE POLISH INFANTRY

Troops from the 3rd Carpathian Division fighting along Snakehead Ridge towards Point 593, 12 May 1944

The ruined monastery (1) on top of Montecassino dominated the battlefield around Cassino and into the Liri Valley (2), up which the Allies must pass. The other side of the Valley was anchored by the enemy-held Aurunci Mountains (3) that also overlooked Route 6, the road to Rome.

Some observation of the enemy was possible from the Allied-held Monte

Trocchio, but its lesser height did not allow it to dominate any part of the battlefield. The Polish attack along Snakeshead Ridge during the fourth operation to take Monte Cassino was the culmination of all the battles that had taken place before on the heights behind the monastery.

The Germans had held onto the barren knoll at the southern end of Snakeshead Ridge (Point 593) since the American



Illustration and caption © Osprey Publishing

34th Division attacked them in January. The carefully defended position on a bare outcrop of rock could only be taken by hand-to-hand fighting, and every attempt during the previous four months by various divisions of US Fifth Army had failed. The lines were so close together that Artillery fire and mortars could not be effectively used. Each German had to be winkled out of his stone redoubt by physical force.

At the start of the battle, the Polish 3rd Carpathian Division held the northern end of the ridge, but the enemy had stubbornly resisted all attempts to evict them from the Point 593. The ridge was overlooked by the enemy from the west and subjected to intense artillery and mortar fire by them. To the east, the German paratroops in the

ruined monastery on top of Monte Cassino had a perfect line of sight to the ridge, making all movement difficult.

The hills surrounding the monastery were covered with sparse vegetation, mostly scrub, grassy outcrops and small trees. The ground was strewn with boulders and rocks with little subsoil, which made the digging of any defensive positions nigh on impossible. Shelter had to be made from stacking rocks together. The German emplacement that the Polish infantry are attacking is no more than a pile of rocks, stones and boulders, supported with sandbags. Its low profile makes it almost invisible in the boulder-strewn landscape. The Germans defending it are well hidden; nothing can be seen of them. The Polish troops from

the 3rd Carpathian Division are all wearing standard British battledress and carrying British weapons and equipment (4). The division had been formed in Palestine in May 1942 from the independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade, which had been raised in 1940 by Polish exiles who had escaped to the West in 1939/40. Its numbers were swelled by men who had been POWs in Russia after the fall of Poland. Their release from the USSR was negotiated in August 1942 and Gen Anders led them out of Russia to the Middle East via Iraq. The division joined the British 8th Army in Italy in late 1943. The divisional badge was a green fir tree on a divided white and red background (5), the fir tree representing the forest-covered Carpathian Mountains of southern Poland. (Howard Gerrard)

Battle of Monte Cassino



THE POLES TAKE THE MONASTERY

Cracks finally begin to appear in the German defences, enabling the Allies to break through

The Polish troops faced the most difficult of tasks during Operation Diadem, taking Snakeshead Ridge and the ruined monastery, both of which were heavily defended by experienced German paratroopers.

Lieutenant General Wladyslaw Anders, Commander of the II Polish Army Corps, took General Alexander's overall strategy on board and planned attacks on all the mutually supporting German defensive positions simultaneously, instead of trying to capture one hill at a time.

Although better weather gave them an advantage over the previous Allied forces that had tried and failed to take the ridge in the previous three battles, it was still a formidable task. But the Poles were highly motivated, and determined to strike back against the Germans who had taken over half of their homeland.

Before the advance, the smoke cloud that shielded the bridge-building engineers and the armoured crossings at the Rapido was allowed to disperse. This indicated to the Germans that something was going on. According to paratrooper Robert Frettlöhr, "we knew something was going to happen because they used to cover the whole valley in fog every night, but on that particular night, 11 May, there was nothing. It was clear and it was awfully quiet."

The area the Polish were to attack was hit first by an artillery barrage on 11 May. Ryszard Kirakowski of the Polish Carpathian Regiment said: "we were preparing ourselves a long time for the encounter with the Germans. We suffered enough during their occupation, and it was time to pay them back, time we were fighting for our freedom. As soon as 11 o'clock came, the sky suddenly became white. 1,600 guns opened fire.

At last: Allied troops march through the ruined streets of Cassino after months of protracted and bloody fighting that mark it as one of the most incredible battles of WW2

Battle of Monte Cassino

It was spectacular. [We thought] after that bombardment, there couldn't be anybody left on the Germans' side. But of course, it wasn't true."

The attacks began as soon as the bombardment was over. Thanks to careful planning, the reallocation of troop resources and, of course, the secrecy under which preparations were made, the Allied troops outnumbered the enemy by three to one. But the German positions were dug in and well defended. Point 593, the vital piece of high ground on Snakeshead Ridge, was taken by the 3rd Carpathian Division, and Phantom Ridge partly taken by the 5th Kresowa Division. But once again the troops came under fearsome fire from the Germans. Come daylight, their positions were brutally exposed to enemy sniper and mortar fire. Casualties were heavy, and it soon became clear they could not hold their gains. Lieutenant General Anders ordered his men back to their starting positions. The Polish forces had attacked too soon, and run into the same problems faced by the Americans and Indians, and with the same results.

Breakthrough

But they were to get another chance. As the allied attacks along the western 20-mile stretch of the Gustav Line made breakthroughs, the Germans could no longer concentrate their fire on these important pieces of high ground in front of the monastery. The 8th Army had got the XIII Corps into the Liri Valley behind Monte

Cassino, and the French had captured Monte Maio. The German 71st Infantry Division was starting to crack, and armoured units were reinforcing the Allied gains.

The next attack was launched in the early evening on 16 May. The 5th Kresowa Division once again swept onto Phantom Ridge. Without support from nearby heights, the German positions were quickly over-run. By the next morning the entire ridge was in Polish hands, and they were able to press on towards Colle Sant Angelo. Although still facing stiff resistance, the Allied gains on the valley floor made the German positions ever more precarious, threatening their flanks and supply routes. In the early hours of 17 May, the 3rd Carpathian Division again attacked on Snakeshead Ridge. Fighting was ferocious, but by the end of the day the Ridge and Colle Sant Angelo had both been taken. The German commander, Major General Richard Heidrich, ordered his troops to withdraw to the Hitler Line.

German paratrooper Robert Frettlöhr was injured during the retreat. "There was a big flash, and that's when I got wounded. When I woke up, my left leg was damaged. I crawled into the first aid post in the monastery." The next morning, Polish troops walked unopposed into the monastery ruins. It had been a hard struggle. As one commentator observed, "It took time to find men with enough strength to climb the few hundred yards to the summit."

A homemade Polish flag was raised over the ruins of the monastery. The Gustav Line had been broken. The only Germans that remained there were around 30 wounded, including Robert Frettlöhr. There was also a grizzly reminder of what the relentless Allied shelling had achieved. Broken bodies of the monastery's defenders were everywhere. And according to Colonel Lakinski, Artillery Commander of the Polish Carpathian Division, "[The Polish troops who took the monastery] came across a long corridor lined with chests of huge drawers, normally used for the storing of liturgical clothes. When they pulled open the drawers, they saw that they had been stuffed with corpses."

“

As soon as 11 o'clock came, the sky suddenly became white, 1,600 guns opened fire”

Ryszard Kirakowski



Illustration Osprey Publishing

LAST STAND

The three battles (four according to Allied numbering) fought at Cassino between January and May 1944 are part of the epic of warfare. The image of the ruined Benedictine monastery atop the hill of Monte Cassino, with soldiers fighting bitterly for every step, is a strong one. Fighting amongst rubble, the Fallschirmjäger were able to turn the situation to their advantage using the stone-built cellars as shelters and seeking protection from the remains of buildings that could no longer burn or collapse under fire. This way they could hide from enemy artillery fire, and surface after the advancing enemy had exhausted every weapon in their arsenal; they are shown here equipped with a MG42 machine gun and an 81mm medium mortar.

THE LINE IS CROSSED

With the victory at Monte Cassino, the Allies finally had the chance to win the war in Italy for good. It was not to be...

With the capture of the monastery, the German defeat at the Gustav Line was complete. Her forces were withdrawn to another pre-prepared defensive position, the Hitler Line, which was around eight miles north. At Hitler's insistence it was promptly renamed the Senger Line, after General von Senger und Etterlin, the aim being to reduce the propaganda potential should the Allies break through it.

The 8th Army spent the next week or so reorganising, moving its 2,000 tanks and 20,000 vehicles through the broken remains of the Gustav Line and preparing for an attack on the Senger Line. But the retreating Germans were not routed. Fighting in the Liri Valley remained ferocious, as the path to the Senger Line was strewn with mines, booby-trapped obstacles and German defensive positions from where they fought rear-guard actions, all of which slowed down the Allied advance. The sheer numbers of vehicled and armoured units caused traffic jams too.

Route to Rome

The attack on the Senger Line got underway on 23 May, with the Polish II Corps attacking the German 1st Parachute Division at Piedimonte San Germano on the right, with the 1st Canadian Infantry Division – a fresh reserve force from the 8th Army – supporting in the centre. On the following day, the Canadians breached the line, clearing the way for the 5th Canadian (Armoured) Division to advance through the gap. On 25 May, the Polish troops took Piedimonte San Germano, and the line collapsed. The route to Rome was clear.

Around 40 miles north of the Senger Line, the Allied forces at the Anzio bridgehead launched an attack of their own. On 23 May, General Lucian Truscott (who had replaced Major-General John P. Lucas as commander of the VI Corps at Anzio) struck with five out of the seven divisions available to him. As the German 14th Army was without its armoured divisions, which had been moved to reinforce the Gustav Line, it could not resist the Allied breakout. The misinformation about a second beach landing north of Rome proved its worth once again too. The 26th Panzer Division had been held to face this expected – but entirely fake – seaborne assault, and could not reach Anzio in time to reinforce the 14th Army, which was pushed back.

Orders ignored

With the German 10th Army retreating from the Senger Line, and the seven Allied divisions no longer trapped at Anzio, it seemed the Italian campaign was nearing its end. Surely the advancing 5th and 8th Armies would press north and the VI Corps move from the Anzio bridgehead, surrounding the beleaguered Germans? As historian Richard Holmes put it, they were ready to “crush the retreating Germans like a nut in a cracker.” But Lieutenant General Clark, disobeying General Alexander's expressed plans, ordered General Truscott to turn towards Rome. Instead of closing the trap and encircling the 10th Army, his forces attacked the capital, allowing Kesselring's troops to escape.

Clark was keen to make sure US troops were the first to liberate Rome, but Truscott didn't share his enthusiasm. “I was dumbfounded,” he later wrote. “This was no time to drive to the northwest where the enemy was still strong; we should pour our maximum power into the Valmontone Gap to insure the destruction of the retreating German Army. I would not comply with the order without first talking to General Clark in person. But he was not on the beachhead and could not be reached even by radio ... On the 26th the order was put into effect.”

Clark led his troops into Rome on 4 June, and was greeted by the city's citizens. But with the Normandy Landings occurring two days later, his ‘victory’ was soon overshadowed and off the front page. And the damage to the Allied advance was done. Seven divisions of the 10th Army retreated to the next defensive position, the Transimene Line, linking up with the 14th Army retreating from the Anzio bridgehead. Their combined forces then fell back fighting to the Gothic Line, a strong defensive position north of Florence. The Germans had been handed a lifeline, and the chance to end the war in Italy had been missed. As General Truscott observed, “there has never been any doubt in my mind that had General Clark held loyally to General Alexander's instructions, had he not changed the direction of my attack to the northwest on 26 May, the strategic objectives of Anzio would have been accomplished in full. To be first in Rome was a poor compensation for this lost opportunity.”

1

The path to the Senger Line was strewn with mines, booby-trapped obstacles and German defensive positions



2



3



ANZIO BREAKOUT & ADVANCE TO ROME, MAY-JUNE 1944

The 1st Regiment Forceman uniform (1) is a composite from several photos taken in and around Anzio on 25 May 1944. The Forceman is dressed and equipped lightly, for quick movement in open-country fighting. He wears the M1937 wool trousers with the M1937 wool/flannel shirt, both standard US Army issue. Both resupply difficulties and the warm weather prompted many Forcemen to wear the wool trousers in place of the mountain trousers during spring 1944. His helmet, jump boots, web gear and weapons are all conventional; he carries extra rifle clips in a use-and-throw-away cotton bandoleer.

(2): Staff sergeant; Rome, June 4, 1944 - Based on a photograph taken on the evening that the Force entered the city, this section leader wears the standard issue FSSF uniform and equipment, including the M1943 field coat whose use the Force had pioneered the previous year. One point to note is the five-pocket pouch for 20-round Thompson M1A1 SMG magazines, with the longer 30-round magazines shoved into it. The Thompson was usually carried by section leaders, but was also popular with any other Forcemen who could get their hands on one.

(3): Forceman, Cannon Company; Rome, June 1944 - This private, previously of Darby's Rangers, is a crewman from one of the company's four M3 75mm GMC halftrack self-propelled guns. The Force inherited the halftracks after Darby's Rangers had been almost annihilated during the battle for Cisterna in the Anzio fighting at the end of January. The halftracks were identified as Diamonds, Hearts, Clubs, and Spades, each having the appropriate emblem painted on the fender or gun shield. The former Ranger wears the standard M1937 wool shirt and trousers with jump boots. The battle-hardened Rangers did not want to lose their identity when they joined the FSSF, and it was common practice for a while to wear their Ranger scrolls above the Force shoulder patch.

A HOLLOW VICTORY?

Tactical blunders and lack of forward planning plagued the Allied efforts to take Monte Cassino

History has not been kind to those who planned the Monte Cassino battles and the larger war on the Italian front. Soldier and military historian JFC Fuller described it as “a campaign which, for lack of strategic sense and tactical imagination, is unique in military history.”

Another soldier and historian, Richard Holmes, argues that the cliché ‘lions led by donkeys’ is far more applicable to the Allied forces in Italy during World War II than it ever was to World War I. And although ultimately successful, it has been popularly described as ‘a hollow victory’.

So what went wrong? Was the Battle of Monte Cassino a ‘hollow victory,’ and if so, why?

In a nutshell, lack of forward planning greatly contributed to the hardships faced by the invading troops. After victory in North Africa, Italy was wrongly considered to be Europe’s soft underbelly, an ideal route by which to chase the Germans back north. As Holmes put it, “the road to what was little short of hell was certainly paved with good intentions”. But as is often the case during war, the reality did not match Allied Command’s expectations.

Too little consideration was taken of the uniquely difficult terrain faced by the advancing armies, and as a result, too much was expected of their soldiers. While nobody could have anticipated just how harsh the winter of 1944/45 would be, even in an average year, the weather would make it very difficult for armoured and motorised units. And the craggy mountains that ran the length of Italy were perfect for dug-in defensive positions, something that was fully understood by the Germans, but the Allies were slow to learn. Only in the fourth battle did the attacking forces enjoy the three-to-one superiority of numbers deemed necessary to overcome secure defensive positions. Before, the piecemeal, hill-by-hill

approach wasted Allied lives in return for very little gain.

Even when things went the Allies’ way, opportunities were missed. The Anzio beachhead, for example, did little other than tie up forces that could have been more usefully deployed elsewhere, and soon became a liability. As Churchill put it, “[I hoped] we were hurling a wildcat on the shore, but all we got was a beached whale.” But maybe a white elephant might be a more appropriate metaphor. As the Germans surrounded the Allied-held territory, the

armies on the Gustav Line were forced to attack in unfavourable conditions to draw enemy forces away from the now-vulnerable beachhead. If they had they been able to wait until spring, better use could have been made of their superiority in armour. Another missed opportunity was the failure to follow up on French gains during the first Battle of Monte Cassino.

Perhaps without the Anzio landing, enough reserves would have been available to capitalise on these gains, but without the available manpower, the attacks faltered and an opportunity to break the line was lost.

The destruction of the monastery at Monte Cassino cast a bitter shadow over the Allies’ achievements in Italy. An internationally-renowned artefact of immense cultural importance, its bombing was of questionable necessity, and might have improved its value as a defensive position. In bombing the building a day earlier than promised – another result of the Anzio beachhead, which demanded air support on the stated date of the raid – the Allies handed the enemy a propaganda coup, as well as slaughtering civilians taking refuge there. And was its importance as part of the Gustav Line overstated anyway? Despite the sheer hell of the fighting on Snakeshead Ridge on the approach to the monastery, it was success in the Liri Valley that brought about its capture, by threatening German supply lines and forcing a withdrawal. So why were so many

Nobody could have predicted how harsh the winter of 1944/45 would be



A Hollow Victory?



Liberation of Rome: A group of US GIs under fire in May 1944. They are fighting against German troops retreating from the Gustav Line

Getty Images

Battle of Monte Cassino

Roman ruins: The remains of Monte Cassino and its monastery, a result of colossal Allied bombing. Ironically, the resulting rubble provided better cover for German troops, who were able to prolong the bitter months-long struggle for the city



A Hollow Victory?

lives wasted in direct assaults on the high ground? As Richard Holmes observed, “the monastery was a kind of mirage, an obsession that swallowed logic. As the Allies came close enough to touch it, it faded away.”

Military sins

Major-General Tucker, commander of the 4th Indian Division that was so badly mauled on Snakeshead Ridge, had a similar view. He was to criticise “the extraordinary obsession in British commanders’ minds that they must challenge the enemy strength rather than play on his weakness... the waste of hammering the enemy’s strongest point is seen at its most extreme form at the Battle of Cassino... where men were hurled time and again against a mountain position which had for centuries defied attack from the south, and which in 1944 was not only the strongest position in Italy, but was held by the pick of the German troops in that theatre of war.” The lessons were learned for the successful fourth battle, but Tucker said of the first three, “these battles were in fact military sins.”

For all the sacrifices made by the Allied troops in Italy, their heroism is largely unsung. Just two days after the fall of Rome, the D-Day Landings in Normandy completely overshadowed their achievements, relegating their victories to the middle pages while the news from France was on the front. Nancy Astor, the first woman to take a seat in the British parliament, is said to have called the British forces in Italy ‘D-Day dodgers’, complaining they were getting a paid holiday while the real fighting was going on elsewhere. It was a frighteningly ill-informed remark, famously lampooned by the troops’ song ‘Ballad of the D-Day Dodgers’, sung to the tune of ‘Lili Marlene.’ By even the most conservative estimates, that ‘paid holiday’ ultimately cost the lives of 327,000 Allied servicemen, half a million Axis troops and almost 153,000 civilians.

MONTE CASSINO

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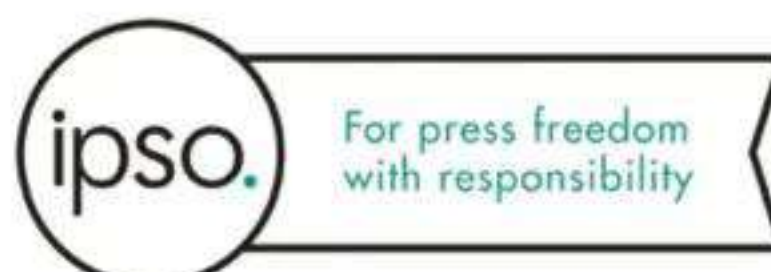
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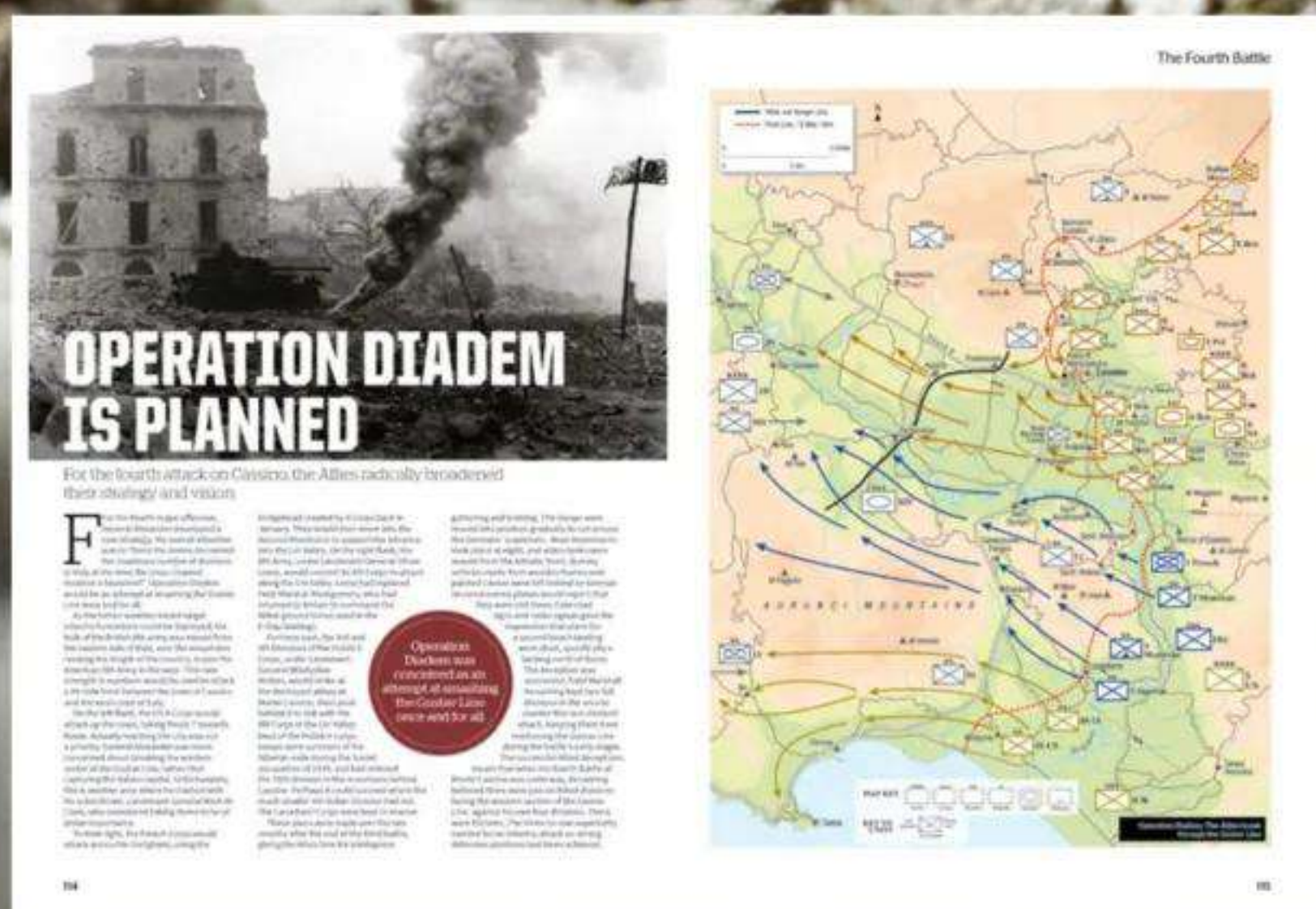


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